



*Misadventures
OF THE
Heart*

AN *Earl's* GUIDE
TO CATCH
A *Lady*

TANYA
WILDE

An Earl's Guide to Catch a Lady

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For Evelyn and Matthew

Chapter 1

Pain. There was so much pain and wretchedness it made it impossible to summon even one coherent thought. Torturous. Lifting one heavy lid Evelyn shut it instantly as more blinding pain pierced her skull. Damn wretched head. That much could at least be determined. A soft groan escaped her lips. She remembered nothing except a vague recollection of consuming a rather large amount of... something. Wine perhaps?

A vile taste coated her mouth and her stomach roiled in protest. She wanted nothing more than to be swept into the sweet allure of darkness, but the continued throb prevented sleep from claiming her. It left her no choice but to be brave. One eye popped open, then another. Gah! She squinted as light invaded her vision. After what felt like hours of torment, the blur of brightness disappeared and Evelyn found herself staring at the unfamiliar face of a male. The breath stilled in her lungs. Her eyes widened. The world stopped.

It had to be a dream. Yes, she was still caught in a marvelous stupor. It was the only acceptable reason. Perhaps she should first assure herself that he was a figment of her imagination before she gave into hysterics.

With a feather light touch she brushed her index finger against his nose. Flesh met her fingertip. Her hand snatched back as she let out a tiny screech.

Oh stars! He was as real as her ruination. Her eyes clamped shut and she forced the wave of panic down that threatened to consume her. *No! No! No!* All the hours spent pouring over maps, carefully selecting every country, every city she wanted to explore in her quest to become a world renowned traveler evaporated in the sleeping face of this stranger.

With a sudden movement his leg brushed up against hers and she scrambled out from under the covers, nearly toppling over when her foot got caught in the sheets. In a daze she glanced down at her attire, which compromised only of her chemise. She cringed. It barely covered her legs.

An earth shattering snore drew her gaze back to the stranger. Goodness! She took a moment to inspect his face. No recognition lit in her, yet somehow he seemed familiar. A glance around the room revealed two empty wine bottles, along with her scattered items on the floor. By some small miracle, whatever had transpired hadn't been in her room.

That might be the only thing that had gone right since Evelyn's ill-fated journey began to two days ago. First her maid unexpectedly fell ill and had to remain with family, leaving her unchaperoned. Then the carriage had broken down in the rain.

Henry. Hope bloomed as she remembered her footman. He would have sent for the repairs of the carriage. Flee. That was her single course of action. Later she would try to piece together her memories, but first she had to put as much distance as possible between her and this man.

She jumped as he stirred and gave another loud snore, terrified that he would wake up before she left. She snatched up his shirt, having spotted no sign of her dress. It gave her an impression of a large man, much larger than he appeared to be.

With a cautious step she moved toward the bed and studied the sheets. It didn't appear to be all that rumpled. Her eyes took in every small detail. She released a shaky breath. He had an impressively strong face, which looked almost innocent while he slept. Even his snoring didn't subtract from his handsomeness. Black hair fell over thick brows and Evelyn had to tamp down the urge to run her fingers through them. She almost regretted that she did not remember the color of his eyes, but if she had to guess, she'd say blue.

His face committed to her memory she turned and edged toward the door. There was a moment of brief anticipation when she heard him stir again.

Please don't wake up. Please don't wake up.

She crossed her fingers as she peeked over her shoulder, her mouth agape at the sight that greeted her. His face and body had turned away from her so she had a full view of his back and thighs. The covers must have slipped when he'd turned, she mused in wonder. Her mouth went dry as her eyes roamed the length of his magnificent body.

His back was broad and muscled. The word powerful came to mind as her gaze ventured even lower. In fact, nothing about him looked

innocent anymore. His thighs were big and strong and... So... So... Hairy?

Evelyn scowled as she inspected his hairy thighs. Was it common for a man to be that hairy? Another loud snore jerked her from her inspection and she marveled at how she'd slept an entire night without being disturbed. It was the first time she had ever heard a man snore and it was rather hypnotic, a low rumbling noise she could grow used to.

Drat! If she had to be ruined, her mind might at least have given her the courtesy of remembering the experience.

Lady Josephine and Lady Belle, her dearest friends, were always prompting her to be more adventurous. How ironic that when she finally found an adventure, it ruined her and she did not remember any of it.

If she left now there might not even be a scandal. Not that it mattered. She had no intention of ever taking a husband. And she would never see this gentleman again.

A crack of light drew her attention to the window. Dawn would be upon them soon. There would still be plenty of time to leave the Inn undetected if she left now. She stole one last glance at the handsome stranger, opened the door and slipped out.

Moments later Evelyn was pacing up and down the Inn's muddy stables lecturing the stable doors for not knowing her footman's location. For all she knew he was off arranging for the repairs of their carriage, but not even that knowledge quelled her frustration. He might just as well be snoring the dawn away. She cursed her lack of attention. Where were her horses? Was there another stable perhaps? It was only a matter of time before someone found her lurking about. Country folk were notoriously early risers. If she had any common sense she would go back to her room and hide until her footman sent for her. It would seem, however, that her common sense had evaporated at the sight of a naked man.

Her fingers pinched the bridge of her nose as the headache that had all but disappeared returned with force. She needed to avoid running into the stranger at all cost, but it would be impossible without her carriage. A horrific thought occurred to her. What if the stranger remembered her? What if she had given him her name?

Good morning Mr. Stranger. You might recall me from last night? I was the strumpet in your bed, but I have no memory of our night together.

How awkward it would be to run into him again. She did not trust that she could manage a confrontation without taking to the hills.

A sudden shiver racked down her legs as cold stabbed at her feet. Her slippers weren't made for wet weather. She sighed in misery,

shooting them a disgusted glare. It was then she noticed a note sticking out of a pocket of the stranger's shirt.

Without thought she snatched the damp note between her fingers and unfolded it. Much of the words were blotched, making it difficult to read. It still might supply a clue to the stranger's identity. Lifting the note up to her face, Evelyn studied each word with great care.

"The Black Night Inn," she read in a soft whisper. It was the name of the Inn they were lodging at.

Her fingers ran over a name she could not identify. They stopped however at the words that followed. Slaughter. Some blotched words. Means possible. More blotched words. Execute. More blotched words.

Slaughter whom? Confusion lit her brow. Again she studied the cryptic words but the rain had almost destroyed the entire content of the note. She had an odd sensation of falling as her eyes lifted in horror. Was the stranger here to slaughter some poor soul?

Don't be ridiculous, she chided herself, remembering his innocent face as he lay in a peaceful slumber.

She could not fathom that her inebriated state would have afforded such a lapse in judgment on her part. The words of the note however, were unmistakable.

Her heart drummed against her chest. Then realization hit her. She had possession of the note, a fact he would soon become aware of once he opened his blue-green-brown eyes. No blue, they would most certainly be blue. Gah! Her hapless adventure that boasted a fatal lapse of memory had just turned into a nightmare. And she was thinking about his eyes! Her teeth captured her lower lip. Oh, she had truly done it now.

Oh Henry. She would have to leave him behind. No need for him to get hacked into pieces as well.

Her mind raced as she studied her surroundings and considered a plan of escape. Leaving on foot would not be wise. She would never outrun the stranger if he gave chase. But then she had no carriage, no means to hire a coach. No, what she needed was a horse, and since she didn't have one, she would have to steal one.

No, she corrected, borrow one, believing she needed to draw the line somewhere. Her hands settled on her hips as she considered how to proceed. How to go about borrowing a horse?

No answer came.

Drat, who was she fooling? She was becoming a thief. A dreadful one at that.

All those years of learning Latin and French, how to paint and play the piano, one would have thought they would teach young ladies the basic skills for survival. But no, they were delicate petals that should be protected at all times.

She snorted. It wasn't as though she had been schooled for thievery, but damnation, she hadn't been schooled for this sort of circumstance either. With a tiny shake of her head she made her way toward the back doors of the stable. The only sounds to be heard were the soft padding of her feet.

There might be a coach waiting to be *borrowed*, she mused hopefully, pausing upon reaching the doors. One swift glance confirmed she wasn't alone.

A few feet away stood a giant black horse. It was hard to miss, given its size. At least she thought it was a horse. It looked more like a demon from hell.

"Well I never," Evelyn muttered under her breath, inspecting the empty courtyard. No groom appeared to be in sight. How odd. Who would leave such a creature unattended? Had she been wrong about her luck? No, luck, would have been a pony, not the monster standing a few feet away. If the horse was any indication of his owner, she would be better off not borrowing it.

Your life is at stake, this is not the time to develop scruples, her inner voice chastised. She had stolen a villain's shirt that carried a rather damning note. Why stop at a monstrous-looking horse?

Filled with uneasiness she approached the beast and soothed her thoughts with images of her brother, Simon and her friends. They would be devastated if anything were to happen to her.

The elusive groom had yet to make an appearance and Evelyn took that as a sign of luck. Her eyes watchful she moved closer still. The beast did not look all that approachable and worse, it was much larger than it appeared from a distance.

But what did she know about horses? Except that you could ride them. She should have taken more interest in being taught to ride. Perhaps then she would not be hesitating now.

"This is a terrible plan." Her words of dismay echoed through the courtyard.

The horse watched her with big black eyes as she reached its side. She chuckled as it snorted against her face, smelling her hair.

"That's not straw you big silly beast," she murmured and reached out to gently run her hand over its thick neck. This was good, she thought on a nod.

With slow, cautious movements Evelyn took hold of the reins and put her foot on the stirrup when the sight of her bare leg reminded her of her state of undress. She was a *lady*. Now look at her. She was scandalous!

A hint of a smile touched her lips.

If anyone saw her now, she would be ruined. She ought not to have this feeling of brilliancy in the midst of terrifying danger, but she

attributed her feelings toward the sense of adventure she was experiencing. Her plan however, was quite simple. Get to Bath and then decide what to do, all the while hoping no one would recognize her.

She shot up a quick prayer as she hoisted herself onto the black demon. Once settled on top she took stock of her surroundings. When there was still no sign of the groom Evelyn let out a breath of relief. That was until she noticed how much of her naked legs were visible.

"Outrageous!" she muttered. But forgot about her nakedness when she saw how high above the ground she sat. She whispered another quick prayer to the heavens and nudged the beast like she'd seen her brother do countless of times. The beast did not move. It seemed to snort at her attempt. To Evelyn's ears it sounded much more like a smirk. Ghostly animal. She nudged it again, harder this time. It just snorted louder.

"Dratted beast," she muttered glaring at the back of its head.

What did her brother do when he urged Apollo to go faster? Evelyn nudged harder still, but the horse stood there with no intention of moving. Then, just when Evelyn would have given up hope, two little rats scurried out of the stables in their direction, causing the horse to panic. A blood curdling scream ripped from her throat as the horse reared.

Evelyn's heart lurched in her chest, but then instinct took over and she wrapped her arms around the thick neck of the horse, holding on for dear life. She felt the legs of the beast hit the ground and without even the slightest hesitation it started forward, racing out of the courtyard, away from the Inn and—mercifully—away from the dangerous man.

Matthew Langdon, the sixth Earl of Grey was woken by a sharp noise that pierced his skull, stabbing at the throbbing ache in his head. He groaned in misery.

What in the blazes? His eyes shot open and then to the empty space beside him as he recalled his beautiful, albeit foxed, guest.

Evelyn.

His lips twitched as he recalled the fascinating creature whose dress hugged her curves almost too tightly, seductively. She'd stumbled into his room with a bottle in each hand, and when she lost her balance she'd laughed at her own clumsiness. He'd been about to make his presence known when she'd spotted him and hiccupped. "You sir—*hic*—are in the—*hic*—wrong room."

He chuckled at the memory as he stretched languidly across the bed. She'd been the most adorable little foxed woman to ever accidentally stumble into his room. The only one as it happens.

Her beautiful heart shaped face held the most tempting full lips. They begged to be kissed. Thin brows defined the shape of her eyes. And what eyes! They were a haunting shade of violet-blue with lashes so long her eyes took on a dreamy appearance. Her hair had fallen from their pins and appeared brown until she stepped into the candle light and hues of red highlighted the freckles on her nose.

Mine.

The ferocity of that one word robbed him of his breath. It punched him in the gut and tempted him to go where he vowed never to go again. Then his mind filled with her laughter and he remembered the sound to be mesmerizing. When she'd spoken his fate had been sealed.

She had believed him to be the devil and like an idiot all he had done was stare at her face. To his utter surprise, she'd then stumbled further into his room and closed the door with a resounding kick, offering him one of her bottles. He had taken it without a word, not certain what else to do, and still in a state of wonder. Then she'd numbed him with a smile so radiant any intelligible speech disappeared from his brain. She was the most exquisite creature in existence. If he were any kind of gentleman he would have directed her back to her room. He wasn't a gentleman.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise that she believed him to be a dream. If one took into consideration the amount of wine she'd consumed it was quite possible. After all, the bottles she clutched in each hand had been empty. Throughout their entire exchange, which consisted of hiccups and gaping, she'd never once perceived him to be a man, but continued to believe him a dream. A fact finally confirmed when she simply undressed and climbed into his bed. Her name had been the last whisper on her lips.

Again if he'd been any kind of gentleman he would have left, instead he'd settled in beside her. An unusual act. He only spent the night in a woman's bed to bed her. He left after that, having no need for what came afterward. He preferred it that way. Until the mysterious Evelyn.

He hadn't even considered what might happen when she woke up to find him very much flesh and bone. He just wanted to be there then when she did. She'd touched a chord deep inside his soul. How long since something had stirred within him, anything in the company of a woman? Six years if he recalled correctly. Perhaps it was her innocence that called to him, or perhaps because she had seen him as a dream, he can now pretend she had been one as well.

He let his hand run over the empty space and longed for her presence. No one had ever looked at him and seen a dream. His mouth twitched when he recalled that she snored ever so lightly, a soft sound that signaled a deep, peaceful slumber. His smile faltered however

when a slither of unease settled over him.

She would not have thought him a dream when she awakened. She would have been shocked, even scared. He did not bother to look and see if her belongings were gone. They were. He pressed his palm deeper into the empty space beside him. Warmth still touched his skin. He sunk his face into her pillow and inhaled the lingering scent of her into his lungs.

Oranges.

He groaned and tossed back the sheets. She hadn't been hysterical when she left. It appeared to be significant somehow. He wanted to find her. He wanted—no—needed to learn everything about her.

Yet, something nagged at him. Evelyn somehow seemed infinitely familiar... But hers was not a face he would forget.

He hoped her journey did not take her to London—the one place he swore he would never re-turn to. He hated the city and everything it represented. The crowds, the noise, the smell, the filth, the pettiness of the ton and the games they played.

He reached for his shirt when he noticed it was missing. Muscles rippled as he pushed away from the bed with a frown and strolled over to the chair where her gown lay rumpled on the floor. She had taken his shirt. If lions could grin he would have put them to shame. She wore his shirt. A predatory glint entered his eyes. It instantly made him hard. It was all he could do not to imagine her legs wrapped around his—

The door burst open.

If he'd been less of man he would have jumped out of his skin.

"What the hell—"

His head snapped up as Carleton, his groom, filled the doorway breathing heavily. Growling in irritation that the man had interrupted his thoughts of Evelyn, he snapped, "Don't you ever knock?"

"Yes sir."

"So get out and knock."

Carleton didn't move, ignoring his master's command. "Sylvester has been stolen my lord," he managed to croak, still trying to find his breath.

"What are you—"

"By a woman my lord," he interrupted, uncaring of his master's wrath. "Wore nothing but a shirt, saw it with me own eyes. Rode out of town like the devil himself nipped at her heels."

Matthew blinked. A half-naked woman stole his horse? He snorted. Preposterous. "There are only two people in this world who can handle Sylvester, Carleton. A woman is not one of them," he replied confidently.

"My lord—"

“It was not Sylvester that you saw.”

“She wore your shirt, my lord,” Carleton interrupted, yet again.

Matthew narrowed his eyes on his groom.

Carleton nodded in understanding.

“The bloodstain on the back?” He had taken a fall the day before.

His groom nodded.

Matthew stared at Carleton in disbelief and growing horror.

“Describe her,” he whispered.

Matthew’s anger mounted with each word as he listened to Carleton’s description of Evelyn. Fury rose in the pit of his stomach with such force that his breath came out in gasps. Bloody foolish woman! Did she not realize that she could be killed? If not by his horse then by cutthroats?

Saints protect her; he would strangle her if she wasn’t dead already. He stilled. The thought of any harm befalling her left him cold. He cursed his growing fear. Later he would examine it and what it meant, for now he needed to go after her. With his decision made he ran from the room.

Naked.

Chapter 2

Evelyn cursed the beast when it showed no sign of slowing. Her jarring body protested in pain and she wondered miserably if the horse was racing her straight into Hell. The flames of which sound much more appealing than this torture, she thought bitterly.

This was without doubt, the second worst day of her life. The worst being the night she overheard Lord *Pompous* engage in a wager to bed and wed her—hence her reason for journeying to Bath so early in the season. Yes, the blame rested squarely on Lord Harry's shoulders.

Evelyn remembered with painstaking clarity why she'd never learned to ride these beasts. She did not care for the sensation, even decided she would steer clear of the Colonies in her travels.

"I'm going to die," she muttered unsteadily, clinging harder to the animal.

Somehow, above the clatter of hooves, a bellowing voice reached her ears. She shut her eyes in dread. Perhaps if she ignored the person they would disappear, but Evelyn knew better. Someone must have witnessed her appropriation of the horse. It would have been painfully clear that she had no clue as to what she was doing. Perhaps this person would be kind enough to escort her to Bath? Instinct, on the other hand, told her that the world didn't work that way. It would be either the owner of the beast or someone he'd ordered to retrieve it, along with the thief. Evelyn resisted the urge to peek at her pursuer and was wholly unprepared for the deafening blow that suddenly sounded through the air, causing birds to scatter and the horse to rear.

Evelyn would forever remember it as the most terrifying moment of her life. As the horse reared, her resolve faltered; she glanced over her shoulder at the pursuer. She only had time to see that his horse had reared too before her hold on her own steed slipped.

Her cry of alarm echoed through the air as she tried, but failed, to regain her grip, hitting the ground with a painful thud. She struggled to catch her breath as pain shot through her head. Blackness dimmed her vision. Hooves galloped away from her. Why that should be important she couldn't recall, but it was.

Her head rolled to the side and she tried to focus her gaze on the other rider to no avail. A curse reached her ears, followed by a thud as he hit the ground. A low whimper passed her lips as her eyes drifted closed. Footsteps rushed toward her. She sensed her pursuer kneeling beside her.

Was it him?

She did not have enough strength to be terrified. Just as well, Evelyn thought. If she'd been able to move she would have curled into a ball and died. The pounding in her head worsened, drowning out all thoughts and sounds. Her eyes fluttered open and at the same time a furious face loomed over her. Concern lit in his eyes even as a vein ticked on his forehead. His tempting mouth opened and closed, but no sound reached her ears. Her eyes drifted closed again. Perhaps he would leave her to suffer in peace.

A memory teased her mind. A familiar face... But it was lost before Evelyn could grab hold of it. Darkness beckoned her to its depth, inviting her to surrender to its pull. She fought against it. It felt too important to connect the face with the memory.

A shiver of recognition passed through her, accompanied by relief. She remembered. The stranger. Another whimper escaped her. Not from the pain, but growing horror that her plan had failed. Was this then, to be her end? It was fine. She had no regrets, no unfinished business or words left unsaid. Her family and friends knew she loved them.

She supposed as deaths went this would be better than most; a quick death. Having accepted her fate Evelyn finally surrendered to the darkness, relieved when it enfolded her in its silky caress and everything turned to black.

Glaring down at the now unconscious woman who lay sprawled on the muddy ground like a pagan sacrifice, Matthew cursed her foolishness. He'd lost ten years of his life when she fell, seconds before his own cursed horse threw him into the mud. Normally he would have no difficulty controlling a horse in hairy situations, but the sound of Evelyn's cry and the sight of her hitting the ground threw him.

Now mud clung to him and the horses had bolted. He shook his head. Infuriating woman. What the hell caused such madness? Surely it had not been the sight of his face? Had she taken one look at him and she made for the hills?

He ran a feather light touch over her chin and his anger gave way to concern when he noticed her pallor.

“Damn foolish woman,” he muttered, his voice laced with worry as he reached out to tuck a muddy curl behind her ear.

“Evelyn.”

She didn’t respond.

“Evelyn,” he tried again.

Still she did not respond. Matthew cursed. He’d have to get her back to the Inn even if he carried her all the way. A quick study of their surroundings confirmed the horses were nowhere in sight. He would love nothing more than to throttle the bastard responsible for that shot. If not for the valuable time wasted to dress, he would have caught up with her sooner.

In quick movements he inspected her small frame, searching for injuries, satisfied when he found none except a small bump at the back of her head. Besides the headache she would have when she regained consciousness, she would live. He let out a breath of relief. This odd woman awakened many unwelcome emotions from deep within him, and he wasn’t happy about it. Not one bit.

“Wake up Evelyn,” he tried once again with more force than he intended. Why won’t she wake up? With a scowl he ran his fingers over where the bump had formed. Could it be more severe than he first thought? It didn’t sit well with him. She was quite small, and the fall had been hard. Would she be able to walk the distance back to the Inn? He knew instinctively she would never allow him to carry her. She would walk the distance even if it killed her. Stubborn chit.

A wave of unease drew his attention away from her and to their surroundings. He found nothing out of place, yet the impression they were being watched did not fade. His focus once more on Evelyn he pressed his lips against her ear and whispered, “Wake up sweetheart.”

Evelyn became aware of the stranger urging her to wake up. It seemed odd that he would whisper in her ear with such soft concern. It certainly made no sense to her addled mind. Why would he show her any concern? Were evil villains even capable of such emotion? Perhaps she might be a tad theatrical in her line of thoughts, she reflected, but an evil villain did sound better than a murderer.

She certainly did not imagine them to be handsome. Oh stop it Evelyn! He’s dangerous and much stronger than you. She’d do well to be cautious. Now that her wits had returned she saw the truth of it. The villain sweeps in, pretends to be prince charming all the while planning to use the heroine against the hero. Only there was no hero... just the distinct possibility she’d been wrong. In which case her wits had failed her...

Even so, the devil had to be faced. Raising her lids ever so slowly she peered through her lashes. The throbbing in her head subsided somewhat as her eyes adjusted to the light. Violet eyes met green ones. The green ones blinked, as if they couldn't grasp that the violet ones had opened. Was that relief in his eyes? Too quickly his expression turned dark and his mouth formed a grim line. Gone was the concerned male, replaced by a strong, hard and very angry one.

"Sylvester could have killed you!" He yelled above her.

Her mouth formed a silent O. Sylvester? It had been his horse? Of course, she mused grimly, resisting the urge to stick out her tongue. Then his words sank into her slow-witted mind. He's angry because she could have been killed? How very... unexpected.

"You're powers of deduction are quite marvelous," she replied as if he were daft, "though I beg to differ on the stealing part."

She did not feel the need to explain her actions. He owed her an explanation since he apparently took advantage of her inebriated state.

Matthew blinked. Surely he had not heard her correctly? When she'd opened her eyes, his relief had been like a shock to his heart. Anger, however, swiftly replaced any concern he may have felt when the direness of her actions slammed into him, leaving him bared, unsettled and shaken. He hadn't meant to snap at her, but by saints! She tried his temper!

"You *borrowed* my horse? Madam, is that all you have to say on the matter?" he asked flatly. A hint of menace entered his eyes, satisfied when he saw hers widen in alarm.

Good. She needed to be alarmed. He pushed away from her, needing to put some distance between them before he said something he would regret later. She was an oddity, and he was determined to unearth all her secrets.

Evelyn managed to get to her feet without so much as a flinch. A quick stock of their surroundings showed no horses and thunder clouds looming overhead. She narrowed her eyes on the man standing a few feet away. He stood with his back to her, clear signs of anger visible in his tense form. Had she overreacted in her presumptions?

She pinched the bridge of her nose. He would want answers. The truth, she reflected glumly, would get her locked up in Bedlam.

One step backward, two steps, pause, three steps, four steps—she slowly edged away from him.

He turned then, his hawkish eyes amused as he noted her retreat, the hard line of his mouth softening.

When he only lifted a dark brow Evelyn blurted, "I suspect I've

made a terrible mistake.”

“Indeed.”

She gave a curt nod. “I thought you were going to hack me into pieces.”

His jaw slackened. After a startled moment, his eyes lowered which brought him notice her naked legs. She shifted uncomfortably under his regard. She’d completely forgotten about her state of undress!

Matthew hadn’t noticed, having been distracted by his anger and concern. He noticed now. Desire slammed into him with such a force it was all he could do not to— Wait, hack her to pieces?

Why the hell would she assume that? Did he look like a ruffian bent on dragging innocent women to his dungeon with a butcher’s knife? What in the blazes was wrong with this woman? Matthew’s heart sank as thoughts of insanity filled his mind. Had she hit her head harder than he surmised, or escaped from Bedlam?

He all but laughed at the irony. The first woman who’d caught his attention in six years, that made him feel something rather than nothing, and she was as mad as a March hare. Fate certainly had a sense of humor.

“What the devil are you talking about? Why would I hurt you?” he snapped and then lifted his hands to stop her from answering. “Do not answer that. First, I want to know why you stole my horse.” His gaze ran over her in accusation. “In my stolen shirt, no less.”

Evelyn swallowed. “I uh...” She hesitated, how to explain her actions? “I did not know that it was your horse,” she answered truthfully. “As to the why, I found the note in your pocket.”

His eyes dropped to where she removed the note and held it out to him, but he made no move to take it.

“You concluded I’d kill you after reading a note?”

Her delicate chin lifted in defense at his incredulous tone. He stared at her for a single heartbeat before he burst out in laughter.

This, Evelyn thought, was exactly the reason her brother wanted her to marry; to save her from her own imagination. She certainly wouldn’t deny that her imagination may, at times, get the better of her. One glance at this man proved this to be one of those times.

When he hunched on one knee, laughter racking his body, Evelyn had had enough. Ignoring years of pedigree and lessons drummed into her, she marched over to where he was hunched over, and kicked him, her foot connecting with his shoulder. *Insufferable goat*. She turned on her heel.

“What the hell was that for?” he shouted after her but she ignored him. With one goal in mind—get back to the Inn, find her footman

and leave—she stomped off.

Laughter erupted from his chest. The impertinent witch actually had the gall to kick him. His lips twitched as he tracked her movements, seizing the opportunity to admire her backside. She looked glorious with her hair falling to her waist, the sway of her hips, and the skin of her bare legs. A foul curse echoed through the air. Once again he had been distracted by his emotions and had completely forgotten about her attire.

“Damnation woman!” he bellowed. “You are practically naked! Ruffians could’ve accosted and man handled you!”

She shot him a glare over her shoulder. “Look around sir,” she said with a wide gesture of her hands, “the only ruffian here, is you.”

Of all the infuriating women in the world, he had to find her. Closing the distance between them in a few strides, he grabbed her by the arm and dragged her toward the field, ignoring her enraged gasp.

“Unhand me!”

His grip tightened. “We need to get off the road before someone sees you,” he growled.

She twisted out of his hold and whirled to impart on him a withering stare. “Why?” she snapped. “So you can manhandle me in the field where no one will see us?”

Matthew blinked at the vehemence in her tone and almost laughed again. He could not help the broad smile that formed on his face. By saints! She had a temper that matched her fiery imagination. “No, my little spitfire, I only considered your reputation. Or do you want everyone to gaze upon those lovely legs of yours?”

Evelyn failed to see the humor. But she hated to admit that he had a point. If she’d not been so preoccupied with getting away from him she might’ve considered the fact.

He must think her a hoyden. She would have thought it. The only course of action now was to get back to the Inn without being seen. Then she would put this entire incident behind her.

“You are right, of course,” she muttered reluctantly, averting her gaze.

Strong fingers gently lifted her chin to meet his gaze. “I will not harm you, of that you have my word.”

That wasn’t the problem, Evelyn speculated darkly as she followed him into the field. He was the problem. Him. With his hypnotic green eyes and gentle touch. And he knew her name whereas she could not remember his. It was a disadvantage that she did not care for. Yet still she followed without complaint.

Her mood improved when she was afforded the perfect opportunity to stare at his magnificent backside—and that she did care for. Even

dirty and bedraggled he walked with an air of authority; a superiority and arrogance that no mere man possessed. He walked as though he not only owned the world, but as though he had a right to own it. It was a walk Evelyn recognized, the walk of a man with superior birth.

Yet she did not recognize him. Of course she wasn't familiar with every aristocrat in England, but if he frequented London, he would've known her true identity and that of her family. Her description along with her first name alone, if asked to the right person, would unmask her and if he was a nobleman, as she suspected, he might be duty bound to do the right thing. That would never do! He also did not strike Evelyn as a man that would allow her to indulge in her travels.

"Oh bother," Evelyn muttered under her breath.

Matthew glanced over his shoulder, his brows pulled together. He smiled when a beautiful shade of red stained her cheeks. So she wasn't as unaffected as she would have him believe. The thought pleased him. What a mystery she remained.

"Are you traveling alone?" he asked offhandedly.

Her startled gaze flew to his. "Yes. I uh, mean no," she recovered, scolding herself for the slip. "I am traveling with a chaperon," she continued, leaving out that her chaperon was her footman, even though she had been more than willing to leave him behind—for his safety of course.

"Where is your ladies maid?"

A big reddish cat slinking through the grass caught her attention. "Oh uh, she became sick on our journey so I sent her home," Evelyn replied, distracted by the cat. It entertained itself with something hairy, a mouse perhaps?

"I see."

Too late Evelyn realized her mistake. She should not have parted with that information, however insignificant it appeared. Eyes narrowed on the back of his head. What was this man about? He seemed to be planning something, she was sure of it, and it no doubt involved her. Heaven forbid he should insist upon escorting her to her destination. That would not do at all.

"May I ask a question?" she asked, redirecting the topic of conversation.

He quirked a brow, curious. "You may."

"Why is it I happened to wake up with a man in my bed?"

The scoundrel chuckled. "I believe you mean my bed. You do not remember then?"

"No," she muttered grudgingly. "I've no memories of meeting you at all."

"I should blister your behind. Had it been any man other than me, you could have found yourself released of your virtue."

If only.

"I am aware sir, and I will certainly never do so again," Evelyn replied, sarcasm laced heavy in her voice.

"And I am to accept your word?"

She snorted. "It is of little consequence whether you accept my word or not."

"You were convinced I was a dream," he teased.

She came up short, glaring at his back. "I most certainly did not!"

That earned her another chuckle.

"You most certainly did," he reassured her.

Her humiliation was now complete. "Then I owe you an apology sir... Not only did my imagination run wild, but I overindulged, behaved like trollop and stole your horse."

Matthew paused upon hearing the defeated note in her voice. She sounded tired and dejected. He much preferred the angry Evelyn to the defeated Evelyn. "Please, call me Matthew. The time for formalities has passed, do you not agree?"

Matthew. The name suited him, she mused on a wistful note, thankful that he'd offered it without her having to ask. She also had no intention of forgoing that particular formality. It kept him at the desired distance. "Thank you for accepting my apology."

He turned then, his eyes locking with hers. "No need for apologies. All has been forgiven," he said, then added with a sly smile, "The moment you stomped away so marvelously."

His ancient green eyes held her spellbound and drew her in... Into what she didn't know, "I do not stomp," she whispered, barely audible, almost indignantly, still captured by his gaze.

Matthew did not think, only reacted, covering her lips with his in a fervent kiss. She stiffened in his embrace and he let his tongue slide over her lower lip, coaxing a gasp from her. He took advantage of her parted lips and plunged his tongue into her mouth, drawing her closer to him.

A soft moan escaped her the same time she melted against his chest. Damn, he wanted her. She was driving him mad with desire. How long since he'd held a woman in his arms? Not since Charlotte, six years ago.

The force of his desire staggered him. But he did not dare. Women weren't creatures to be trusted, no matter how sweet and innocent they appeared. He would do what he had done six years ago. He would walk away and never look back.

He broke the kiss and muttered in a harsh breath, "We need get back before you freeze to death."

"Y-Yes of course," Evelyn stammered between breaths as she watched him march away. She was not at all certain what had just

happened. One moment he'd kissed her passionately and the next he'd pushed her away like she had some sort of illness. It should not bother her. She had no business kissing him, especially not since she sensed he'd be nothing but trouble. Moving to follow him, she shivered as coldness stabbed at her legs.

"I can't imagine what compelled you to steal my horse without wearing the proper attire." She heard him mutter darkly.

Her delicately arched brows rose mockingly. "Are you talking to the trees now?"

He shot her a glare. "You did not escape from Bedlam, did you?"

Evelyn shrugged, not insulted by the question. "You will never know."

He snorted. "Have it your way, sweetheart. But I would've expected a little more gratitude toward the man who saved your life. Can you even grasp what might've happened if any other man came across you in your present," he gave her a once over, "state? A lesser man may have been overwhelmed with admiration and lust and had his wicked way with you."

What rot!

But the idea of *him* having his wicked way with her was a surprisingly appealing one, yet he seemed entirely unaffected by their impromptu kiss. Evelyn ran her gaze over his masculine form, taking in his broad shoulders, narrow hips, long muscular legs and then lastly, his buttocks. She wondered what he would do if she pinched them.

"Wicked way indeed," she murmured. Her head started to throb again.

"I beg your pardon?" he shot her a look of complete surprise.

Had she said that out loud?

"Nothing," she replied awkwardly under his penetrating gaze.

"Do you perhaps want me to have my wicked way with you, Evelyn?" His voice hoarse and throaty, the force of it sent little prickles down her spine.

"Don't be ridiculous. I hardly know you," she replied with false indignation, standing firm even while her legs felt unsteady. She needed to get rid of him, not encourage him.

"Don't play games with me, sweetheart." There was a hint of warning in his voice. He stepped closer until he was so close, she could feel his breath on her cheeks.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"So you are not using my attraction toward you as a means to manipulate me?"

Evelyn blinked at his accusation, confused. Manipulation? Attraction?

“Now I know you cannot be serious,” she answered on a laugh. “I’m no beauty nor do men find me attractive. Which begs the question, what games are you playing?”

Matthew stared at her in disbelief. Not attractive? He saw the confusion in her eyes, saw curiosity. It appeared she truly believed she was no beauty.

“I don’t bother with games. I find you very attractive.”

To prove his point his lips found hers again in a hard and unrelenting kiss, his arms pulling her into his embrace, crushing her against his chest. Just as quickly he let her go, and once again turned to walk away, leaving Evelyn to stare at his back, perplexed.

Her temper sparked. Not playing games was he? Well there would be no more games played. He can be sure of that.

“Gentleman my backside,” she muttered, moving to follow his lead.

Matthew chuckled. “You have a biting tongue, Evelyn. Be careful that it does not get you into trouble one day.”

“I’m merely commenting on the fact that you are not very gentleman like.”

“How very astute you are, madam. But then,” he paused for effect, “I have been in the company of a hoyden these past few hours.”

Evelyn wanted nothing more than to kick him again, but she managed to control the impulse. Still she was a bit breathless when she said, “You, sir, are a rake.”

“I have never been a rake, sweetheart, but the devil in me likes to play with little angels like you.”

What was this? Rogue code? “I’m hardly an angel.”

Her thoughts slipped back to the events of earlier. No, she was hardly an angel.

“You are an angelic creature, my dear.” He told her, his voice low and compelling. “You even taste like heaven.”

Her cheeks reddened. She was way out of her depth and dreadful at flirtation. Then again, it hardly mattered, she decided. Before this day was over she would be gone, and she would never see him again.

“Well, you are the first devil I’ve ever had the misfortune to meet.”

“I’m sure I won’t be your last,” he replied darkly.

Evelyn considered his statement. It was a casual assertion, but his tone made no pretense at it being a simple one.

“So, where are you traveling to?” she asked, guiding the subject back to a safer topic. She quickened her pace so that she could walk by his side.

“The lady is curious now, is she?” His dark eyes suddenly glinted with mischief as he glanced down at her.

“Absolutely.”

His finger came up to brush her cheek, and she tried to ignore the

pleasant sensations stirring in her blood. She pressed on, “Not to mention good manners.”

“It appears that I have lost my manners.”

Evelyn snorted. “We should pick up the pace, lest we want to be soaked,” she murmured casting a worried glance at the darkened sky.

She was suddenly anxious to get away from him and the feelings he provoked in her. He could keep his secrets.

“Whatever the lady wishes.”

The Inn came into view the same time a droplet hit the point of Matthew’s nose. He glanced at Evelyn, noting her pensive expression. She intended to make a run for it. He knew it as certain as he knew the grass was green. She was a lady, of that he had no doubt. Her mention of a footman and maid confirmed it. Though he had suspected it from the first moment he met her. And yet she travelled alone. No gentleman worth his salt would let her continue on her journey without a proper escort. Not that he claimed to be a gentleman worth his salt, but Evelyn was different.

“Is it a secret then, your destination?” He heard her ask behind him.

“You honestly cannot remember anything from the previous evening?” He sounded amused.

“I— Ah, well no, as I have said.”

“I have business to see to.”

Her nose wrinkled in annoyance. That was it? What a vexing vague man.

“Does your business including butchering or some other nefarious deed?”

“No.”

Evelyn tamped down her irritation. His moods were quite disconcerting. One moment he exuded charm, friendliness and passion and the next moment he was distant, cold and brooding. Also, he was too handsome for his own good.

“Did I spill my deepest, darkest secrets?” she asked in an attempt to get some answers.

He only snorted.

The man could try a saint. It vexed her to no end that he gave nothing of himself away. Evelyn decided to ignore him and his tiring moods. Instead, she focused on her aches and pains, men-tally counting all the places her body hurt.

He cast a sidelong glance in her direction, taking in her pallor, and slowed his pace until she strolled once more beside him. “You’re awfully quiet,” he remarked after a moment, breaking through her thoughts. “You’re not planning to leave without saying goodbye?”

Evelyn made a face behind. He hadn’t even broken stride.

“If only my body would allow me,” she muttered, her voice laced with sarcasm. She was, however, intending to do just that. The thought left an odd feeling in the center of her heart.

Chapter 3

Two hours later Evelyn was sprawled, quite scandalously, in a comfortable chair enjoying a steaming cup of tea. Her thoughts were occupied by one particular man as her eyes followed the patterns of the rain clattering against the window. The sensation of his lips still scorched her skin. She should have been outraged that he'd taken such liberties, but for some unexplainable reason, all thoughts of propriety fled when she was in his presence. It was quite nerve-racking. Especially now, that the heavy rain prevented her from slipping away.

Evelyn thought back to the past day and wondered at what point her life became so complicated. No bells had rang, marking the point of change. No little men jumped out from shrubberies shouting 'surprise'! It was only now in the quiet safety of her own room that Evelyn felt the subtle shift like that of a fluttering butterfly.

Her fingers settled on her mouth in a soft touch. The only experience she had in the field of kissing had been stolen pecks—nothing as passionate as Matthew's searing kisses. But even if she had been kissed in that manner before, Evelyn doubted it would have had the same force, the same intensity that compelled her to kiss back.

After his last onslaught to her senses and mouth, the impact of her fall finally caught up with her and it had taken them another hour to arrive at the Inn. Matthew, bless his soul, had gradually slowed his pace so that she could keep up. And so an hour of silence had ensued. An hour of being tormented by thoughts of his kiss. The Inn was already bustling with activities and together with his amused groom, Carleton, they'd snuck her through the back entrance without being seen.

And now that she was in her own room, Evelyn had begun to relax once more. Well, except for the blasted kiss she couldn't rid her mind

of. No matter, as soon as the rain stopped, her footman would return with their repaired carriage. She heaved a sigh of frustration. Being comfortable again still didn't change the fact that she was stuck here for another night, maybe two, with *him*.

She glanced toward the door in speculation. Somewhere between the confines of these walls Matthew would be resting, or pacing, or doing... something. Was he obsessing over the kiss as she? Did he feel frustrated that he would be stuck for another night or two, with her?

Bah! It was in her best interest to forget about him. Her predilection toward travel meant nothing good could ever come of their acquaintance and she would rather avoid the unpleasantness of a scandal. Not that she cared one wit whether she was cast out of society or not. Their endless set of rules on decorum and deportment were enough to try a saint. But Evelyn did not want to shame her family and friends with unnecessary scandal even if they never would abandon her.

Lifting the cup to hover over her lips she was about to take a sip when the scrape of an opening door drew her attention to the figure that suddenly filled the doorway. Her heart leaped against chest.

"It's bad manners not to knock," she snapped, irritation overriding her initial shock. She couldn't, however, stop her traitorous heart from fluttering at the sight of him. He leaned casually against the doorway, regarding her with amusement, his arms folded across his chest. Dressed entirely in black he looked dangerous and powerful. The glint in his eyes so mesmerizing it sent shivers down her spine. It was quite disturbing how breathtaking she found him. He was magnificent. He was trouble. Evelyn shifted in her chair and cleared her throat.

"Can I help you?"

Matthew's breath caught. Again. She stole the very air from his lungs every damn time. It was all he could do not to yank her body against his and kiss her senseless.

Mine.

The thought pulsed through his blood and for a mere second he wished that she was. But he pushed the notion aside. She could never be his. He had to remember that. Women, especially beautiful women, were untrustworthy and deceitful.

"Can I help you?"

His lips twitched at the supposed indifference in her voice and he sensed her defiance. If she knew the wicked deeds he wanted to do to her at this moment, his little hellion would try to box his ears. Without replying, Matthew stepped into the room and kicked the door shut with a thud, pleased her eyes widened in alarm. It felt oddly good to know that he could ruffle her feathers.

"I thought I could entice you to a game of chess?" he drawled lazily.

His predatory smile widened when she considered him through narrowed eyes. Evidently she did not trust him either. Good girl. He supposed she was debating whether to agree or toss him out, but she would soon learn he would not accept the latter.

Surely Evelyn's ears must be playing tricks on her. Chess? Now there's a pile of rot, Evelyn thought suspiciously. She ought to scream, it would serve him right. "Actually *Mr. Langdon* I—"

For a moment he looked surprised that she'd learned his last name and she inwardly smiled, like a cat, with cream. She had her own means to obtain certain information.

He recovered just as swiftly. "Matthew, please."

"Actually Mr. Langdon, while I do like a good game of chess, I find myself exhausted and in no mood for company," she replied pertly, waving her hand in a dismissive manner.

"I see. I suppose that losing can become rather tiresome."

He chuckled at her outraged expression.

"The predictable outcome, Mr. Langdon, is that I always win."

"How about I join you for a cup of tea then?"

Did he not know what 'in no mood for company' meant? It appeared not, as he only stood there, looking impossibly arrogant. She considered him for a moment, not quite certain what he was up to. It was clear from his lazy stance and hard set of his jaw that he wasn't going to leave. And even though his words were framed as a question, he expected her to agree. He would not be dismissed, it seemed. And even though the chances were slim that he'd depart in this weather, she had rather hoped he had, regardless.

Why then, was she so ridiculously pleased that he hadn't? It appeared that where he was concerned, her trusting mind and her traitorous heart were at odds with one another. Even so, Evelyn couldn't see any harm in sharing a cup of tea, improper though it might be. It might even make time pass quicker.

"Very well sir, you may join me for tea."

He smiled knowingly as he took a seat across for her. *Oaf*.

Pouring tea into his cup Evelyn considered his motive for joining her. It could be that he was merely lonely and looking for company, but she wasn't fooled. Nothing about him could be considered as uncomplicated. He was hard and masculine and so...domineering, maddening, arrogant and annoying in his attractiveness. Yet aside from his obvious male inherent flaws, she sensed something else, something deep, something gentle, something redeemable.

Handing him his tea, she took a deep breath when his fingers brushed hers. Sharpen your senses, Evelyn! She would need her wits

about her if she was to come out on top. Nothing would give her more pleasure at the moment than to rile him. He sipped his tea rather innocently, watching her expectantly. Evelyn furnished him with a crooked smile. His cup paused midair.

"I gather you are here to ask for my hand in marriage?"

His face turned comical as he sputtered, tea spilling over the brim of his cup. Evelyn managed to hold her composure. By a thread.

"I beg your pardon?" he rasped, wiping the tea from his chin.

Evelyn hid her smile behind her cup. This was even better than she could have hoped for. Normally she wouldn't make such outlandish statements, if it could be seen as such, but in the case of Mr. Devilishly Handsome, it was refreshing.

"It is why you are here, is it not?"

Matthew stared at her in astonishment. "How did you come to that conclusion?"

"Well, why else would you be here?"

"Madam, I do not know whether you've escaped from Bedlam or simply read too many of those blasted women's novels, but I am most certainly not here to ask for your hand in marriage."

Evelyn almost laughed out loud at his vexed tone.

"Good, now that we have that all cleared, I'll have you know the books I read are nothing as depraved as your thoughts."

"You tricked me," he accused incredulous.

"Nonsense! Now where was I?" she asked, giving him a mesmerizing smile. "Oh yes! I am reading a novel with the title, *Lady Sugar Finds Love*. It's written by an unfortunate woman who thought she would never find love because of her circumstances. It's a very good read. I will be happy to loan it to you."

Matthew grimaced. "You mean it's about a whore finding someone to marry her?"

A funny noise escaped Evelyn, something akin to a laugh and a snort. Her hand flew to her mouth, failing to gasp in mock outrage.

"Just because you're so high up on your throne does not mean there are not others struggling to make their way through this world," she managed to say with a straight face. "I wager if you were put in her shoes for just one day you'd expire on the spot, you insufferable old goat."

She finished the insult with a flair that Matthew rarely saw. No one dared to call him names, much less to his face, and yet she did so with pleasure.

He tried to keep his tone light as he said, "Let us call a truce between us. Your company would shed some brightness on this dreary day."

"It would, however, not be proper."

He blinked. "Proper? You have been nothing but improper."

"Notwithstanding recent events, I would rather steer to the side of caution."

"I doubt you know how, my dear. Alas, we are two people trapped in the same establishment, waiting out a storm. I hardly think enjoying each other's company is a crime."

"The last time I enjoyed your company I woke up practically naked in your bed, and you were naked."

Matthew was taken aback by her admission. Or perhaps he was only taken aback that she'd voiced it out loud.

"Yet, your virtue is still intact."

Yes, lovely.

While Evelyn was relieved she hadn't forgotten a night of wickedness, she was completely unprepared for the disappointment she felt. It had never bothered her before, but after such passionate kisses, Evelyn caught a glimpse of the price for her decision to never marry. Would it be so bad to be loved by a man, this man, for one night, a night that she could hold onto for better or worse?

She did not know, but murmured into her tea nonetheless, "Well, that's too bad."

A devilish smile spread across his face and she bit her lip to keep her own smile from broadening.

"Is that a proposition, sweetheart?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she scoffed, straightening her spine, not thinking anything of his use of her title except for the hoarse note in it. "I am beyond relieved that my virtue is still intact."

"Is that so?"

Evelyn angled her face away. He would see the truth reflected her eyes. She had been given a taste of heaven, and she wanted another taste but dared not. If she had chosen to give her virtue away, it would never have been to a man like him. He would demand the surrender of her body, her mind, her very soul. Perhaps even her heart.

That would have been expectable, except Evelyn wanted to travel the world. A husband, especially one like Matthew, would never permit her to go off and explore the wilds of Africa. Her brother on the other hand still held hope that she would marry. He can't fathom why a lady wouldn't jump at the chance to snatch an Earl.

"Mr—"

"Matthew."

"Fine. Mr. Matthew. Why are you here? You must know it is, as I've said, highly improper."

That earned her the lift of an arrogant brow. "I believe we've covered this topic already and deduced that there is not a proper bone

your delectable body.”

Evelyn sputtered. “I did not intend for any of my improper behavior! And perhaps I might have overlooked us shearing tea in such an improper way if we were friends or even mere acquaintances but, we are neither.”

“I disagree. We have become very well acquainted, my dear.”

Evelyn’s stare turned stormy. “I have nothing more to say, so either voice your ulterior motives or leave.”

“You do not believe that I enjoy your company and I have no other motive?”

“No.”

He set down his tea and folded his arms around his wide chest. “Very well Evelyn, I will go.” He saw the relief on her face, knew it would be short lived, “After we have discussed recent events.”

She huffed, then said, “I cannot imagine why.” An edge of nervousness had crept into her complexion.

Matthew continued, “In light of these recent events, I demand answers.” He held up his hand when she would have interrupted. “Surely you did not believe I would just let you go?”

Evelyn sat in stunned silence as his words mulled in her head. A tremor of unease made its way down her spine. Memories flashed through her mind.

Sick maid, broken carriage, rain, impatience, delayed, misery, wine, Matthew, kiss.

Her eyes flew to his. Now he demanded answers. Had she known she would accost a man in his bedchambers and make a spectacle of herself she would never have left London. And that brought her to the reason she had left London.

Lord Harry Spencer.

If she hadn’t overheard him plotting to compromise her, she would never have left the comfort of her home. She would never have continued without her maid and her carriage would never have broken down. She would never have indulged in wine and she would never have stumbled into Matthew’s bedroom.

“Evelyn?”

His voice pulled her out of her reverie. Coming to her feet swiftly she moved to stand by the window, staring at the storm raging outside. Could it have been fate that created all these extraordinary circumstances so that she could meet Matthew?

“What is it that you want to know?” she murmured softly. If she had any hope of getting rid of him she would need to answer his questions. This had not been the hand of fate.

She heard the scrape of his chair and felt rather than saw him come up beside her. He took her hand in his. Her traitorous heart jumped at

the simple touch.

“I have a confession.”

Saints, now he had a confession. She didn't think she could survive a confession, but still, she craned her neck to search his face. Goodness but he was tall. She barely reached his shoulder. He truly made an intimidating figure. Their eyes locked, and it felt as though he gazed straight into the depths of her soul.

“Oh,” she heard herself murmur when she recognized the desire in his eyes.

Taking a step closer he leaned forward and whispered softly, “From the first moment I laid eyes on you, stumbling into my room, I've felt something that I've never felt before.”

Oh my. Evelyn swallowed. Her mouth suddenly dry.

“You feel it too,” he said matter of fact. “I know you do.”

She did not deny it. She couldn't even if she wanted to. Not only would it be a lie, but she couldn't form a single word of reply.

Matthew watched her violet eyes widen with fascination and curiosity. She had beautiful eyes— large and intelligent. They were shadowed by thick dark lashes giving her a dreamy countenance. He could stare into them forever. A whisper of familiarity echoed through his mind and he frowned down on the mysterious Evelyn. Nothing about her added up. She was a lady, of that he had no doubt, yet she hardly acted like a one. She was an innocent, yet ran around stealing horses while scarcely dressed. Instinct urged him to demand she reveal all her secrets, or walk away and pray he never encountered her again. Everything about her was dangerous to his heart. He ought to leave her be, yet wasn't ready to let her go.

Her scent filled his senses. It was intoxicating. She was intoxicating. Looking at her now she emanated radiance and brightness. It held him captivated.

“I want you.”

“You— Ah—” Whatever she was about to say died in her throat as she caught the truth in his eyes. He saw her swallow. “You do?”

His response was a lazy purr. “I do, and you want me too.”

“What? I—”

He leaned closer and bent his head to the crook of her neck, breathing in the scent of her.

“You smell delicious,” he murmured against her skin.

He heard the ragged draw of her breath, but she didn't pull away. He was astonished that he had to struggle to resist taking her into his arms and kissing her senseless.

“It— It's the soap,” Evelyn stammered, her voice trembling.

Matthew smiled when he saw her shiver at his touch.

“Are you going to kiss me again?” she asked brazenly.

He lifted his head to study her. He could see the desire in her eyes, a hint of curiousness calling to the predator in him. Her tongue flickered out to moisten her lips.

Desire slammed through him.

He clenched his fists at his side. “Do you want me to kiss you, sweetheart?” He needed to hear her say it.

She bit her lip. Common sense warned her that this was not a man to be trifled with and yet her body wanted him in a way she did not understand. In the end common sense won out, he was just too dangerous.

“No,” she said on a breathless whisper.

“Liar,” he chided softly. “You want me to kiss you. You wanted me to kiss you this morning and you want me to kiss you now. What’s more, Evelyn, you want to kiss me back. Admit it.”

Evelyn opened her mouth and closed it again. His green eyes held her captivated to the point of speechlessness.

“Evelyn.” His voice was a hoarse whisper, a pleading note. To hell with her saying it! What he saw in her eyes was all the encouragement he needed. He took her face in his hands and lowered his mouth to hers. Her lips parted in a small gasp and he did not wait for her to press them together before deepening the kiss. For a moment she stood rigid in his arms, then a soft moan escaped her and she leaned deeper into him. His body pressed against hers, backing her into the wall. Slanting his head he urged her to open even more to him.

Then just as suddenly she shoved at his chest, breaking out of his embrace. “We cannot do this Matthew,” she protested weakly.

He closed his eyes at the sound of his name. “One kiss Evelyn,” he breathed raggedly. “Only one more.”

Her heart pounded rapidly in her chest. In the back of her mind Evelyn knew this was dangerous. She should ask him to leave, but she could not stop herself from wanting one more kiss.

Moving as if in a dream, she gently placed her hands on each side of his face, lifting herself onto her toes and kissed him, the scent of sandalwood making her senses swim. She felt his left hand move to her waist and pull her closer against him. The kiss changed then. His lips became more searching, insistent.

She hesitated, but then decided to the devil with it. She wanted to be kissed senseless, by him. This would be their moment. She’d barely finished the thought when he broke away, breathing hard. She stared at him confused, while he stared at her with wonder, his arm still around her waist.

“Evelyn, if we don’t stop now, I won’t be able to stop.”

He was so tall, so strong, so overpowering and yet his reassuring

hand on her waist was gentle. In that moment Evelyn desperately wanted to say yes. Yes to everything he wanted from her. But giving herself to him would mean giving up her independence. She knew, without a doubt, that if she said yes now, he would take over her life in a heartbeat. He would expect nothing less than her full surrender.

"I cannot." She took a step back, out of his arms. It had been nothing but a moment of insanity.

Matthew forced his hands to let go of her when she stepped back. His body raged with suppressed desire and he had to fight the urge not to show her just how much she wanted him. He would let her go, for now. There was something between them, too powerful to ignore. Every instinct in his body told him they would be good together, so he could not make a wrong move now. He would have to treat her with care and thought, or risk spooking her. But he would not stop until he had her in his bed.

His jaw tightened. It was time to find out exactly who she was and what she was up to.

"Join me for dinner," he said, daring her to refuse.

"Why?" Evelyn asked defiantly.

Matthew smiled a knowingly. "Because we both need to eat and I don't want to eat alone."

"Very well," she conceded. It seemed innocent enough. She could also use this opportunity to learn more about him. "Dinner would be lovely, thank you."

Stepping closer, Matthew took her hand in his and placed a gentle kiss on the inside of her wrist. "Until this evening, Evelyn."

Evelyn watched him leave with apprehension. She did not believe for one second that his calm demeanor was anything but. She'd seen the predatory look that entered his eyes when she'd said no. Leaving as soon as possible was the only option.

Chapter 4

At exactly seven o'clock Evelyn entered the dining room, prepared for anything, except the sight of Matthew, freshly bathed and dressed informally, with just a waistcoat and the sleeves of his white linen shirt rolled up to the elbows, revealing strong bare forearms. He stood when he saw her enter and Evelyn tried not to stare at his muscled arms during a breathless moment in which her heart fluttered in her chest.

"You look ravishing."

She nearly snorted, but then she took in their surroundings. Not a nary soul besides the two of them occupied the room and candles illuminated the table in an all too romantic way. Their eyes met. Held.

"I hope you don't mind, but they only have beef stew on the menu tonight."

"I don't mind, no," Evelyn murmured. "I take it none of the other visitors are partial to beef stew then?"

"Astonishing, I know."

An awkward silence ensued as Evelyn took the seat he held out for her, his hand brushing against the back of her neck, causing a trembling sensation to pulse down her spine.

Matthew was the first to break the silence. "So, do you have any family, Evelyn?"

"Yes. I have a brother."

Her direct answer surprised him and he regarded her intently before he asked, "Does your brother not care that you are traveling alone?"

"I'm not traveling alone," Evelyn said innocently. "But even if I were, it would not be any of your concern."

His lips twitched. He would let her believe that. For now.

"What about you? Do you have any siblings?"

"I am fortunate enough to be an only child," Matthew replied, but then added, "Although I do have a Dane named Copper."

She tilted her head. What an odd thing to say. She tried to imagine him as a boy. She could see him as a little scruffy lad running around the house with dog named Copper. She could not imagine growing up without her brother, Simon. "You named you dog Copper?" she asked, a smile spreading across her face. "What a silly name for a dog."

"It seemed fitting at the time," Matthew said gruffly, entranced by the soft corners of her mouth. "Why are you not married?"

The question was so sudden Evelyn jerked in response. His eyes observed her reaction like a hawk. Yet in them she could see nothing except blatant curiosity. Evelyn wasn't fooled. She contemplated how to answer his question. For some reason, she did not want him to know about her dreams of becoming a world renowned traveler. He did not strike her as a man to indulge such desires.

"I have not met a man I wish to marry."

Her meaning was clear.

"Have you met many men, Evelyn?"

She shrugged. "I suppose as many as one would expect to meet, Mr. Langdon."

"I see."

"You see a lot, sir."

He chuckled, and Evelyn found herself staring at his mouth. What a marvelous sound. What marvelous lips. She remembered those lips on hers. What marvelous kiss.

"I see as much as one would expect to see, Evelyn."

His words brought her out of her musings. She could not help but smile back at him, suspecting this wasn't a side one often saw from him. It made her feel warm inside. His next words however filled her with icy dread.

"You are traveling to Bath, I presume?"

Evelyn's heart threatened to burst out of her chest. He could not possibly have deduced that from anything she had said to him, she told herself.

"My apologies, Evelyn," he said suddenly, his hand reaching out to touch hers in reassurance. "It was not my intention to make you uncomfortable. I am merely curious."

Evelyn did not believe him. Every word uttered from his devilish mouth was calculated and served an ulterior purpose. He had his reasons for being curious; she just didn't know what they were.

"I am not inclined to share my story with a stranger."

"Am I a stranger, Evelyn? I recall us being, quite intimate."

Her face flamed.

He leaned closer, the heat in his eyes setting her ablaze. "There is

something here, between us. Something I believe is worth exploring.”

She swallowed. This was exactly what she had wanted to avoid. “That would not be wise.”

“Why? I know you feel it too. I felt it in the way you kissed me back. Don’t deny it.”

She didn’t. “Be that as it may, it can never happen again. I’m sorry if my behavior led you to believe that there can be anything more than our shared kisses, but there cannot.”

Matthew said nothing, only stared at her steadily. He sat back, wanting to push, but instinct and thirty years of existence warned him not to.

“I see.”

Their stew arrived and Evelyn heaved a sigh of relief, grateful for the maid’s timing. A moment longer under his penetrating gaze and she would have expired on the spot. The duration of the dinner past mostly in uncomfortable silence, Matthew avoided questions of a personal nature, only remarking on the food and weather and Evelyn ate as fast as she was able, refusing his offering of wine. Only later, when she was in her room alone, did her hands begin to shake.

The next morning the activities outside in the courtyard were a source of obsession for Evelyn, watching it from her bedroom window. Coaches were arriving and leaving as the onlookers bustled about, their lively laughter filling the air. The drivers whistled at the women that were sashaying about, smiling provocatively at any gentlemen who caught their fancy. The rain had finally stopped pouring about an hour ago and almost everyone was outside, relieved to be able to continue on their journeys. Horses were being groomed and walked about, but only one horse in particular held Evelyn’s attention. A beast she would never forget. And he was being saddled for his rider.

He was leaving.

Her relief did nothing to sooth her disappointment. Where will his journey take him, and would he spare her a thought once he was there?

They’d avoided each other since the awkward dinner the previous night. Something felt off, however. Evelyn couldn’t put a name to what exactly, but it was a gnawing feeling that would not dissipate.

The previous day, there had been a moment when all her senses were so completely aware of the attraction that pulsed through her veins that she would have surrendered to every inch of him, if he had asked. But it had only lasted a moment. He was not a man that would be used. And perhaps that was the off-ness that she sensed. She only wished she could make sense of him, or this attraction. There was something very tormented and soulful about him, as though he was

haunted, that pulled her into his web. She could not help but be enthralled.

But he was leaving.

Evelyn had been certain he would insist on escorting her, or perhaps it'd never been his intention to insist upon it, perhaps he would just escort her without her consent. How like a man that would be.

The sight of him striding purposefully to his groom caught her attention. He spoke, his head bent low, motioning to the Inn. Now that's not at all suspicious, Evelyn thought dryly as she viewed the scene unfolding in the distance.

Her wayward footman had sent word that their carriage would be ready by sunset. She'd also learned that he had fallen in love with one of the scullery maids. The two of them planned to elope. As romantic as that might be, it was impossible not to feel envious. Evelyn had never heard of two people falling in love so quickly. It must be wonderful to have such trust in someone so implicitly.

It was one of the main reasons Evelyn had chosen a life of independence to pursue her dreams rather than marriage. Once you chose a partner, you entrusted to them your life. How could anyone be trusted with such a life altering decision?

But then, it hardly mattered what choice you made. It would still be the last big choice you ever made, since if you married, you became the property of your husband, and he would then continue to make all your big choices for you.

These past two days, on the other hand, gave Evelyn some insight as to why a woman would still sign her freedom away. She understood now why people gave in to the lure of their desires—the fantasy of love. The illusion was quite brilliant, really. But the fact remained, desire would never equal love.

It's probably why the majority chose more practical methods of choosing their partners, like wealth and standing. Matthew was no exception to the rule. He bled masculine appeal and power. A powerful combination any woman would find very hard to resist.

She was finding it very hard to resist.

But Evelyn had long ago accepted love did not exist in physical attraction, only the illusion of it. Love only existed in purest form of friendship. If that could not be achieved between partners in marriage, then love would never grow.

Evelyn's own parents had been an example of what happened when no form of friendship existed between partners. It's why it had been so easy for her to decide to follow her dreams instead of joining the marriage march.

No sound reached her ears, nothing to warn Evelyn of his presence except the sudden ripple of awareness that drew her from her

musings.

Matthew.

She turned. He stood in the doorway, impeccably dressed and imposing as ever. A wave of euphoria hit her—as though she did know him, as though they had met before. Only she could not call to mind where she thought she recognized him from. Perhaps she recalled him from her own fantasies, the ones where her hero saves her and carries her off to his castle. Evidently he appealed to her in every degree, and that made him dangerous indeed.

He stared at her, taking count of everything, even the stray hair hanging down her cheek. So this was it then. Would he insist on escorting her or would they say their goodbyes in a civil manor? She would much have preferred sneaking away in the cloak of night, but that wasn't an option anymore.

"You are leaving." It wasn't a question. She wanted to hear him say it even if only to put her suspicions to rest.

She thought she saw disappointment flash briefly in his eyes, but it was gone in a blink.

"I will be back before dawn. There are things I need to see to," he said. His face was devoid of expression and his tone solemn.

Evelyn presumed he wanted confirmation she would still be here when he returned.

Her chin lifted and a spark of defiance entered her eyes. "I will not be here when you return."

He blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"I will not be here—"

"I heard you the bloody first time. What I want to know is why?" he growled.

Evelyn straightened at his tone. "While I have grown fond of this establishment it's only natural for me to continue on my journey."

He took a menacing step forward until he loomed over her in an intimidating fashion. "I will escort you."

"But what of your business you need to see to?"

"It can wait."

Evelyn's resolve faltered as her mind searched for a reason to give him that would assure his departure, without her. The lie slipped out before she could stop herself, "I'm afraid that won't do. I am to meet my betrothed."

She watched in apprehension as his mouth opened to speak and then closed again. His eyes glazed over as he seemed to grow taller before her eyes.

"You are betrothed?"

Evelyn angled her face away so he wouldn't see the truth in her eyes. She inwardly applauded her halfwit mind. It was the worst

possible lie to utter.

“Who the hell is your betrothed and why did you lie when I asked you why you haven’t married?” he snarled, his voice sharp and venomous.

Evelyn’s mind raced at how to answer that question. She could give him any name and any name would still be the wrong answer.

It still did not stop her from blurting the first name that popped into her head, “Damien Granville, the Marquis of St. Aldwyn.”

She immediately regretted her decision. The Marquis was her brother’s best friend, and a notorious rake. Not only would he never marry, he would never waste his time in the country. Evelyn wrinkled her nose, suddenly distracted with her own thoughts. Damien really was a poor choice of husband. If Matthew came from her world, as she suspected he did, he would never believe that the Marquis would be betrothed, least of all to her. She needn’t have worried however. Matthew’s face had drained of all color.

Evelyn took a step back when his eyes turned hard and furious. His shoulders bunched and his hands fisted at his side, the tension almost unbearable.

“Tell me,” his voice low and hoarse, “why you never mentioned you were engaged?” The last was forced out between clenched teeth.

Evelyn shivered, but said, “It did not seem relevant.”

His eyes widened before they narrowed threateningly. “Not relevant? We shared a bed, we kissed. Intimately. And it did not seem relevant?”

Evelyn cringed. She was such an idiot. “Damien and I have an understanding—of sorts.” With every word she sank deeper into a black abyss.

“You have an understanding?” Matthew gave a cynical laugh. “So you make a habit of getting foxed and climbing into strange men’s beds? Kissing other men?” he growled, looming over her small figure. “He is going to marry a trollop, though I’m sure he will understand.” The last was an unforgivable insult.

Evelyn gasped in outrage. A moment passed as they stood and glared at each other. To her shock his hand reached up to cup her cheek but fell away before it made contact. Without another word he turned and left, but paused at the door and said, “You deserve each other.”

Evelyn watched as he slammed the door behind him through a vision of tears. She wiped at them furiously. Her suspicions of his birth had been proven correct. He was a Lord. She turned toward the window to stare at the courtyard, watching as moments later, Matthew appeared, shouting at his groom furiously while he mounted his horse. He shot one last glance in her direction and set out, riding

out of her life. She continued to stare even as he disappeared from sight.

She should have boxed his ears at the insult, but she had deserved it. It still hadn't hurt any less. She couldn't blame him. She would have thought the same had she been him. It did however surprise her that he believed her lie so easily. He had not even demanded, well, anything actually.

Her brows drew together.

Again Evelyn had the sense that something seemed off. And again she couldn't put a finger on it. He had left rather suddenly, and if he returned before dawn he would be a force to be reckoned with. Evelyn sighed heavily. She should never have lied. But as she would depart tonight the point was moot. She wouldn't see him when he returned, if he indeed, returned.

It would be so easy for him to learn that she lied about being betrothed. If he then dug deeper he would find that St. Aldwyn, while still a happy bachelor, was however acquainted with Simon Tremaine, Earl of Westfield, who has a sister named Evelyn Tremaine.

Evelyn started to pace the length of the room. He would be back. She was certain of it. But what could be the driving force of his determination? A sense of duty perhaps? Whatever the case may be, she needed to make haste. Now. Her heart pinched in protest, but she ignored it. It would not do to grieve for things that could never be.

Matthew dismounted his horse in front of The Black Knight Inn long before dawn, just in case Evelyn tried to slip away. He hadn't lied when he said he had business to attend to. From the first moment they met, something about her nagged at the back of his mind. So he'd ridden out to Bath to confirm his suspicions. His jaw hardened. She was no other than Evelyn Tremaine, sister to his oldest friend, the Earl of Westfield, Simon Tremaine.

Well, former friend.

Despite this, no one could confirm whether she was indeed betrothed to the Marquis of St. Aldwyn. He knew the bastard well. And he hated him with every fiber of his being. And to his belief, St. Aldwyn would never settle down. But because of the connection to Westfield, he could not be certain whether she'd fabricated the entire story or told the truth.

She hadn't been honest about her identity, so perhaps she'd lied about the betrothal. In fact, he was quite certain everything that came out of that seductive little mouth of hers comprised of half-truths. Indeed, she'd even deceived him about meeting St. Aldwyn, for he happened not to be in Bath. Neither was Westfield or any other relative of the Tremaine family. *So where the hell is she going? And why*

is she traveling alone?

None of this changed the fact that she had misled him. For her sake, he hoped her betrothal was a ruse. Or it meant that once again, St. Aldwyn appeared to be involved with a woman Matthew desired.

"Hell."

Matthew raked a trembling hand through his disheveled hair. Exhaustion circled his eyes and anger pulsed in his blood. No, Matthew thought darkly, anger was too mild a description for what he felt. He wanted to lash out at something—or someone in particular. That was the only reason why he didn't break down her door. He needed to get his emotions under control. He might still decide to strangle her for her deception, but if he saw her now, he would make an utter fool of himself.

And he hated that he needed to hear her admit St. Aldwyn was not her betrothed and that she would not leave him. Matthew did not know which thought scared him more, the latter or the former. He glanced up to where he knew Evelyn's room to be. Nothing would please him more than curling around her body and holding her until she left the world of dreams and came back him. He shook his head sharply. What had the damn woman done to him? With long purposeful strides he strode through the entrance and settled in the dining room, a predator waiting for its prey.

Her head pounded something fierce. It was becoming an unwelcome habit, entertaining herself with drink. Sinking deeper into the tub, warm water coming up to her neck, she let her lashes drift shut and listened to the activities outside. Ah bliss. It was still early, yet people sounded everywhere, their voices drifting toward Evelyn, the sounds of hoofs trotting along the street oddly comforting.

She mulled over the absurdity of her latest misadventure. She'd enlisted the help of Mr. Canvas, a lanky old man in possession of a coach, to escort her to Bath because her carriage had disappeared along with her footman. Point of fact, the only favorable thing about finding brandy in the coach had been it dulled the pinch in her heart somewhat, unfortunately not permanently.

Then, on their arrival, she discovered that Mr. Canvas had gotten the destinations wrong! Instead of Bath, he had taken her to Bristol. He then left her in the hands of his nephew, Tom, to see her settled for the night.

Evelyn dipped her head backward; her face submerged in the water. She loathed finishing her bath- the warmth soothed her delicate skin. How fortunate that she'd never sent word to her aunt of her pending arrival, knowing her aunt would never mind an unexpected appearance. Her brother on the other hand would want to be informed

that she'd arrived in good health.

Evelyn closed her eyes in an effort to calm her mind so that her headache might disappear. They popped open again at the sound of an all too familiar voice.

"Excuse me madam, have you seen a woman about..."

Evelyn's heart plummeted to her toes. She knew that voice. It was the same voice that haunted her every moment and her every dream.

She craned her neck to peer at the window. Oh good lord. He stood right outside her window, the shadow of his silhouette as discernable as the clouds in the sky. How had he found her? Here in Bristol, no less? Evelyn strained her ears to pick up their conversation.

"Don't rightly know sir, this is a respected men's establishment and they don't allow women of any kind. Ye could try the Peaches and Plum Inn or Gabby's Lounge. It's the most popular amongst the posh that pass through here."

Evelyn gasped.

Men's establishment? Had she heard correctly? Gentlemen don't take kindly to women who infiltrate their establishment, regardless of their class. Why hadn't she thought to question her whereabouts?

Not even when Tom handed her a pair of breeches, shirt and jacket did she view it as odd, in fact, she remembered being all too happy to obliged him. But surely after Tom brought water for her bath they would have learned that a woman occupied one of their rooms?

"Oh when I get my hands on you, Tom," she muttered under her breath, snatching up a towel.

Why would Matthew have pursued her? What did he hope to gain? Then it struck her—he wasn't about to let what happened between them go. Had he discovered her lie?

In quick jerking movements she dressed in the clothing Tom had provided and set about drying her hair. She hoped Mr. Canvas and Tom were somewhere nearby. There was a cap on the chair in front of the hearth. Ah yes, it formed part of the outfit Tom gave her.

Admittedly, the men's attire was much more comfortable and far easier to dress, the freedom of movement pleasant and envious overall. Once done she padded toward the window, where she noted Matthew no longer stood outside her room. Oh how it would irk him if he knew she had been only footsteps away.

Botheration! Why did he have to have unruly hair and broad shoulders and strong features and eyes so vivid they pierced your soul? They were by far his most fascinating feature. Ancient. As if they've seen far too much, held all the knowledge of this world, and found it lacking. Tired eyes.

Stop it! She chided herself. These ridiculous musings of his eyes did not change the fact she would have to, once again, steal away like a

thief in the night. For the last time, she vowed.

Evelyn would never regret her decision to remain a spinster so that she could follow her dreams. It had been her decision. The only reason (in her estimation) that she was now plagued with reluctance was because she did not wish to end her adventure, certainly not because she was developing tender feelings for him.

She headed toward the door and listened for any activities in the hallway. Satisfied when she heard none she opened the door, just enough to poke her head out, and see if no footman lurked about. Lady Luck once again favored her side. She slipped out and moved with caution down the hallway, fully alert. Whether she was going in the right direction, she could only hope. The establishment was eerily silent, she could hear no more sound coming from the streets. It must be her nerves, she reasoned and flushed at the thought of sleeping in such a place.

In the near vicinity a door slammed shut and Evelyn nearly jumped out of her skin. Flattening against the wall, her arms stretched out wide, she glanced left and then right, wide eyed. Stars. She nearly succumbed to the vapors. As it were, her heart drummed against her chest.

As soon as everything went eerily silent again she let out a relieved breath. Her relief however was short lived when a commotion somewhere to her right caught her attention, followed by yelling and then a steely voice, "I will tear this place apart if you don't tell me where she is."

A shiver rippled down her spine.

He'd found her. And by the sound of it, he was ready to kill someone. Well, now she knew for certain she was heading in the wrong direction. Pivoting, she came face to face with Tom. "Oh!" she started, nearly leaping up against the wall. "Tom! You scared me to death!"

She took a deep breath to calm her nerves. "Why did you bring me to this... this... place?" she whispered furiously, her hand covering her heart.

Tom had the good sense to look ashamed when he whispered back, "You weren't in any danger here, my lady. I watched over the room the whole night, I did."

Another furious yell reached their ears and Tom grabbed her wrist, pulling her in the opposite direction.

"How did he find me Tom?"

Tom only shook his head and motioned for her to remain quiet. Little rascal. Though not so little as they were the same height, even though he was much younger. But he was right, lest they alert Matthew of their whereabouts.

Evelyn glanced over her shoulder in the direction of Matthew's voice; sure he would barrel after them at any moment. "How did he find me?" she muttered, perplexed.

It was doubtful that Tom or Mr. Canvas apprised him of her whereabouts and no one else saw them arrive. Well, not that she knew of. Sparing a glance down at her attire Evelyn hoped it would be sufficient to escape undetected.

They entered the kitchen and she heard Tom whisper to keep her head down. Evelyn supposed that while she might be dressed like a lad, her face was another matter. Perhaps a spot of mud would do the trick? Keeping her head down she followed him through the kitchen, but not before she heard a furious yell resonating through the building.

"Evelyn!"

She actually cringed at her name being bellowed. It felt as though at any moment someone would point a finger at her and give her identity away.

"Evelyn! I will tear this place apart, Evelyn!"

"Tom!" she whispered worriedly and his hold on her wrist tightened. At last they reached the back door that led outside.

"Hurry my lady, before that man finds you here."

Chapter 5

Matthew stood across the street, leaning against his carriage and scowled furiously at The White Horse, a men's establishment he suspected Evelyn to be hiding in. Damn if that woman wasn't as slippery as an eel. And damn her for running away from him, with a man she didn't even know. Her footman could count himself lucky that he only got away with a black eye and couple of bruises, but Evelyn, oh he wanted to wring her pretty little neck.

And even though he suspected where she hid, he was in no mood to run around in search of her. That she remained hidden even after he'd bellowed her name like a madman did nothing to quell his suspicion. He would wait her out.

An image of Charlotte sprang to mind. The memories of how he'd let that bitch into his heart, and then she'd ripped it to shreds, still lived strongly in his mind. He'd be damned if he'd let Evelyn do the same. She appeared to be different, not as malicious and deceitful as Charlotte, but she had left without a backward glance, not to mention deceived him. He was such a bloody idiot.

All of a sudden the boy called Tom appeared from a narrow alleyway to the side of The White Horse and disappeared into a building across the street. Tom had been the first lad he'd approached about Evelyn's whereabouts. The boy had denied any knowledge, but when his fingers twitched restlessly, Matthew caught the stench of a lie. Not that he expected any less where Evelyn was involved.

The lad reappeared and darted back into the alley, only to appear again with another lad, walking swiftly down the road toward a waiting coach. He cursed that it was not Evelyn. His suspicions were apparently unfounded.

Where the hell was Evelyn? He'd been so certain that the lad would

lead him to her. With one last glower in their direction he turned away, only to hesitate and narrow his eyes on the boys. One lad had a very odd walk about him, almost as though two sticks had been attached to his legs.

It could not be.

Matthew's jaw went slack with shock. His face hardened when the lad looked over his shoulder to survey their surroundings.

"Bloody hell!"

Pushing away from his carriage he started toward her in furious strides. He assumed the old man they were conversing with was the elusive Mr. Canvas, who Matthew had up until now not been able to find.

Well, was this not a curious development? he thought darkly. Here he'd been worried that she might have been kidnapped or worse, when all she'd been doing was gallivanting from town to town, dressed as a boy. And by the look of desperation on her face, he presumed word had reached her of his arrival. His heart pinched. Did he mean so little? Was he so worthless? The questions nagged at the back of his mind. He cast those thoughts aside as he came up behind her. To his satisfaction the lad's eyes widened in alarm.

"Evelyn."

Evelyn whirled around at her name being growled, and came face to face with the devil. Fury lined the hard planes of his face and she could not stop the small gasp that escaped her parted lips. But that wasn't what made her heart start to hammer in her chest. It was the raw intention in his eyes, as if he would make her pay for whatever crimes she had committed against him. Her mouth dropped open, and he smiled crookedly, a cruel edge forming at the corner of his mouth.

She took a step back.

His smile deepened.

She watched, in part dread and part fascination, as his eyes travelled over her body heatedly before they locked with hers. The punishment reflected in them unmistakable. Oh, what arrogance! If he believed he could barge into her life and act like she belonged to him, he could go to Hades. She belonged to no man! There was no reason for him to act so...so... barbaric!

"Trading me in so soon, sweetheart?"

Hot embarrassment flooded her cheeks upon hearing the implication in his voice. Her temper sparked and she replied in a stiff manner, insulted at his reference, "I was not aware there was anything to trade."

His glare moved to rake over Tom and Mr. Canvas before settling on her again, "Is that so?"

“Yes!” She glared back at him. “What are you doing here?” Because the question needed to be asked.

Those hard eyes hardened even more. If that was at all possible.

“Why, I am here for you, sweetheart.” He took a menacing step forward. “You weren’t where I left you, so I began to wonder whether you were perhaps kidnapped or worse, but apparently you just fled—again.”

Oh! She wanted punch him, but inhaled a calm breath instead and said, “That, sir, is none of your concern. Mr. Canvas is gracious enough to escort me to Bath and—”

“Like hell he will,” Matthew growled. “And for the record Evelyn, everything you do is my concern.”

He sounded so infuriatingly certain of that.

“It is not, you big buffoon!” Evelyn squealed in outrage.

The insult did nothing to deter him.

“I will escort you to Bath and you will tell me everything I wish to know. Which reminds me, does St. Aldwyn know where you spend your nights?”

Confusion lit her brow. “Damien?” she asked, before realizing her mistake. “As a matter of fact, he is aware of my travels and does not mind them in the least,” she amended in a clipped voice.

“You seem awfully certain of that,” Matthew responded with eyes narrowed. “And perhaps that is one of the reasons why, Evelyn, I have the oddest notion there is something you aren’t telling me.”

That’s because she wasn’t.

“Be that as it may, Matthew, I do not have to tell you anything,” she returned, her voice low and tremulous before she spun around to leave, but he caught her arm in an unrelenting grip, jerking her to him. His eyes bore down on her, harsh and dark. “You’re coming with me.”

Before she could protest his manhandling of her he began to steer her toward his carriage and Evelyn noticed that Mr. Canvas and Tom had conveniently disappeared, leaving her no choice but to be dragged along by this barbarian.

By the time they reached his carriage Evelyn’s palms were sweaty and her heart threatened to burst. It did not assuage her fears that his face was a mask of carved stone and his grip painful. How did one manage a man in this emotional state? If this even was an emotional state. And therein laid her problem—she had no idea why he was acting this way.

Before Evelyn could determine a way to calm him, he grabbed her by the waist and deposited her into the carriage, following in one swift motion he settled across from her. The carriage shot forward as soon as the door shut and with it, any means of escape.

Wary eyes studied the man seated across from her. His jaw was clenched tight and his shoulders tense as he stared out of the window aimlessly, ignoring her completely. She had expected a tongue lashing or at the very least some snide commentary, not this silence. Now he seemed desolate to her in his state of anger, perhaps even a touch vulnerable.

Folding her hands on her lap, Evelyn hid the slight tremor that passed through them and focused on her anger. She would not feel sorry for him. If he had acted as a gentleman should when she'd stumbled into his room, all this could have been avoided.

"Why did you leave?"

The question was asked softly, but Evelyn heard the icy resolve in his tone. She was not surprised by the question, however. Men like Matthew wanted control in all matters. They wanted to be the ones who left. What she had not expected was the vulnerable note in his voice. Her gaze settled to his cravat in thought, not certain how to answer his question without further raising his ire.

"Answer me, Evelyn."

The steel was back in his voice.

Cad, but he was demanding. How had she not seen it before now? Evelyn would have loved nothing more than to give him some glib answer, but he would not stop until he knew everything he wished to know. The determination in his eyes proved that.

The truth was out of the question too. Oddly enough, she felt safe behind the skirts of her lie. Not just from him, but from her as well. Her 'betrothal' protected her against whatever attraction existed between them.

She lifted her shoulders apologetically, averting her gaze. "What reason was there to stay? We kissed, and while marvelous, it did not mean any-thing. And besides," she continued, the corner of her lips lifted slightly, "it's not like you love me."

The moment the word love slipped out, Evelyn cringed inwardly. What had possessed her to say such a thing!

Matthew's face drained of all color as those treacherous words stabbed at his heart. It's not like you love me. Words that had haunted him for six years. Memories assailed him.

The man hadn't even bothered to leave the bed or cover his nakedness, but then, neither had Charlotte. Getting out of the bed naked, sweat clinging to her body, she walked toward him, hips swaying provocatively.

"Why are you so shocked, my love?"

Matthew could scarcely breathe, his heart hurt so much.

"Why Charlotte? Why would you do this?" His voice came out in a ragged whisper.

She touched his cheek and murmured, "He is just some fun, darling. You are still my number one."

Matthew pushed her away from him. "I thought I was your only one. How could you do this to me? To us."

Her cynical laugh filled the room. "Oh come now Matthew, it's not like you love me."

He flinched as his heart cracked open at her words.

"Oh dear," her hand covered her mouth mockingly before she said, "You do love me."

Matthew turned away from her before she could see the tears shining in his eyes. The last thing he heard as he left was her laughter that followed him out.

With a shake of his head he rid himself of those painful memories. Like an idiot he had believed he loved her, now it all seemed so foolish. But back then, he would have conquered the world for her.

He cast a look of affront Evelyn's way. "You are right, of course. I do not love you," he said flatly, the memories of that night making his voice cruel.

Evelyn's heart pinched at the painful pull of his face. It was gone in a blink, replaced by a blank mask. She angled her face away, but not before she noted how stiff he had become. The awkward silence that ensued was deafening and Evelyn fought the urge to prattle on over meaningless things.

She refused to dwell on his remark or the pain reflected in his eyes. Instead she closed hers and listened to the sounds of the carriage, and that of the horse's hooves hitting the ground along with the rattling of chains, finding it oddly soothing. When she shifted her weight on the hard leather seat she accidentally brushed his leg and her eyes flew open. She quickly pulled away, but couldn't go far. His body took up most of the room in the carriage.

At the contact he shot her a heated glance before once more returning his gaze to the outside, as though he couldn't stand the sight of her. He probably couldn't, Evelyn thought with a furrow of her brow. But what had she done to vex him so? All she did (to her knowledge) was to continue on her journey. What else then, could it be? Might the rea-son for his pursuit lie behind the whisper of familiarity she sensed? Had he sensed it to? Or had he learned to truth?

Stars and heaven above! It was no use speculating over matters she could no more solve than his current mood. There was only one manner in which she could put her speculations to rest. Ask.

She steeled herself before she went to the heart of her curiosity. "Have you ever married?" she asked, rather bluntly.

“Why do you care?” he shot back bitterly, not even bothering to glance her way.

Evelyn’s lips tightened, turning down at the ends.

“I don’t. I am merely making conversation.”

Matthew observed her through the corner of his eye. Perhaps he’d been too hasty in his assessment of her. She didn’t seem the malicious sort that would hurt someone intentionally, even if she was a little liar. Could her lies stem from the same mistrust that plagued him? Possibly, he thought. And that was the heart of their quandary. They did not trust one another.

Perhaps he should have left her when he had the chance, but something about her prevented him from walking away. And upon further reflection, he had found her beauty travelled far deeper than just appearance. She was intelligent, kind and had a wit that outmatched most men.

What he felt whenever she was near, whenever he thought of her, was confounding. All of his senses came to life in her presence. It would seem that the time of running from his past, had come to an abrupt end.

“I had a fiancée once,” Matthew found himself admitting on a whisper.

Maybe if he extended an olive branch, she would do the same.

Her stunned gaze flew to his. He had her undivided attention.

“Who was she?” she asked gently.

He quivered at the soft, low timbre of her voice.

“Her name was Charlotte Manning,” he replied after a moment as if the very name held the power to scorch his skin.

To his relief she remained silent, as though she sensed that if she spoke now, he would drop the subject all together.

“I found her in bed with another man.” His mouth curled into an involuntary snarl.

Her eyes widened at his bitter admission and her lips formed a silent O. But he did not see pity. He supposed that was something.

Evelyn’s heart broke for the man sitting across from her. He must have been hurt deeply.

Then. Understanding dawned.

His fiancée had betrayed him with another man. She had betrayed her fake fiancé with him. What he must think of her! And how could any woman betray him in such a horrible fashion?

Harlot. Hah! It rhymed with Charlotte. Charlotte the Harlot.

“I beg your pardon?” Matthew asked stunned by her words, his face taking on a comical expression.

Evelyn blinked. Had she spoken aloud?

“My apologies,” she responded abashed. “I have a habit of voicing my thoughts.”

Matthew gave a bark of laughter. Instead of pity she resorted to name calling.

“I take it the man in question got what he deserved?”

She regretted her question almost instantly when his smile faded into a murderous curl of his lips.

“I should have killed him when I had the chance.”

Evelyn declined to comment on that. It had nothing to do with her lie that was shockingly similar, she reassured herself. Yet the question remained, what did he want from her?

Unfortunately he did not let it go.

“Not curious to know who he was, Evelyn?” he asked scathingly.

Evelyn gripped her hands together. “I’m sure it’s none of my concern.”

“Oh but it is, sweetheart,” his mouth formed a cruel edge. “After all, you are betrothed to him.”

What! No. Of all the things he might have said, she expected that the least. Her eyes closed of their own accord as his words enlightened her to the truth.

“Damien?” she whispered, appalled. It could not be.

“Yes.” He watched her reaction with fierce intent, his shrewd eyes missing nothing.

Evelyn’s heart sunk in the direction of her shoes. Surely fate would not be so cruel? Yet she had chosen the same man to be her fake betrothed that betrayed Matthew. How could Damien do something so awful? That man’s depravity knew no bounds. She had always known he was a rake, but she could never have imagined just how notorious he was.

“I am truly appalled and sorry for what happened to you,” Evelyn said truthfully. It might even have been the one true thing she’d said since they met. “Quite frankly, I don’t know Damien that well. I had no idea...”

Evelyn wasn’t lying. She had known Damien all her life, he was her brother’s best friend after all, but couldn’t claim to know him on a personal level. They have never exchanged more than a few words and he had never even asked her to dance. He had always just been... there.

Matthew clamped down the unexpected surge of jealousy and the icy dread that formed in his stomach. She was lying. She had to be. “Calling him by name does not imply an amount of intimacy or knowledge?”

Oh good lord. Now he believed she was lying? The irony was not lost her.

“What are you implying?” she asked, tucking a stray curl behind her ear. “I speak the truth and you turn it into an insult.”

He leaned forward until he was inches away from her face. “There is nothing truthful about you,” his expression turned stony, “and there is nothing truthful about St. Aldwyn either.”

Evelyn felt at a loss. “What do you want from me?” she whispered exasperated at his ever changing moods.

Matthew snorted at her question. “Do you not find it odd that your betrothed is not in Bath? But then, not so odd considering he does not own any residence near or in Bath?”

What? Evelyn gaped at his statement. “How could you possibly know that?”

Ignoring her question he continued, “Which brings me to my final conclusion. You lied about meeting him.”

Evelyn snapped her mouth shut.

He touched her lower lip with a gentle finger. “I will never let you marry that bastard. Never.”

Heavens. Did he need to touch her so?

“What do you want from me?”

“The truth.”

Her eyes wide Evelyn made several attempts to speak, but no words formed. He acted as though she had been the one to steal the sun from his sky and cast dark thunderous clouds over his life. It occurred to Evelyn then, that perhaps she had not been the problem, but Damien, when she named him her fake betrothed.

“Why are you lying to me?”

Why indeed.

“I am not lying,” she sounded lame even to her own ears. “Why are you doing this? You don’t even know me.”

Her question brought him up short and he sat back suddenly, raking a hand through his already unruly hair. “You are right, yet again. I hardly know you, and you hardly know me.”

“You admit I am right. How positively chivalrous of you.”

A wolfish smile lit his face.

Evelyn scrunched her eyebrows together and tipped her head to the side. “You are the most confusing man,” she observed. One moment he was all scowls and growls and the next he gifted her with a grand smile that lit up the carriage in flames.

“And still you know me in the way that it matters.”

She did? She gave a slight shake of her head. “What way?”

“We kissed and we share an attraction toward one another.”

“And if I do not wish to be attracted to you?” she asked helplessly.

The corner of his eyes wrinkled. “Then you should kiss me, Evelyn, and rid yourself of your attraction.”

Her hands clenched as she fought to remain unmoved by the image of his lips on hers that suddenly assaulted her mind.

"You are mocking me, sir."

He looked at her pointedly. "Did you truly believe I wouldn't search for you?"

"I can hardly think why you would?" Evelyn felt her brows draw together. "You are under no obligation toward me."

For a moment he hesitated, as if measuring his words. "You lied to me, and that has made me curious," he finally answered.

"You are pursuing me out of curiosity?" That made no sense to Evelyn.

He gave a single nod. "But I have used the wrong approach. I have let my anger get in the way. A mistake I will not make again. As for my curiosity, do you believe in fate Evelyn? That fate guided you to my room?"

"I believe you make your own fate," she returned, alert now at his mention of the word approach. What did he mean by approach? Nothing good, she was sure.

"Am I to understand then you wanted to come to my room?"

"Don't be absurd, that was an accident, as well you know."

"Mayhap," Matthew interjected, "but I do believe in fate."

That sparked her temper. He made too much of this entire situation when all she made of it was the potentiality to ruin her dreams of exploring the exotic lands she read tales about as a child. How grand it would be to meet a Chinese Emperor or a Russian prince! Much grander than being shackled to a mere man.

"I don't give a rat's tail about what you believe in, sir."

"Tut-tut, such language for a lady."

Evelyn had enough of his games.

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded.

He gave a soft, rueful smile even though his eyes remained heated. "I am keeping a watchful eye on you, that is until we find St. Aldwyn and clear this matter of betrothal."

That still did not answer her question.

"Clear this matter of betrothal? Have you lost your mind?"

He gave her a strange look. "My mind is here with me Evelyn, it is yours that seems to be lost."

"You are in no position to clear any matters concerning me," Evelyn snapped, alarmed at the thought.

"Do you love him?"

"Love has little to do with betrothals." She hoped she put him off any thoughts on clearing matters up. But his voice was soft and certain when he said, "Liar."

"There is nothing to clear," Evelyn said firmly, glaring at the smirk

that filled his face.

“Are you finally admitting that you lied about the betrothal?”

“No!” she snapped.

He grabbed her hand suddenly, pulling her onto his lap and pressed his lips against hers before she could protest. His mouth demanded hers to surrender. Evelyn went rigid for a brief moment before she started to melt into his embrace, her hands reaching up to twist in his hair. Almost immediately the kissed gentled, but his arms held her tighter against him, his hands roaming the length of her body. She shivered, and just as suddenly Matthew ended the kiss, his breath coming out in harsh gasps.

“I will get the truth out of you yet, Evelyn,” he whispered harshly against her exposed neck, running his tongue over her bare skin.

Evelyn was too dazed to react or to notice the building that came into view. However, alarm set in when he studied her face. His eyes glittered dangerously.

“We’re here.”

Chapter 6

We're here.

His words sounded like something from a chapter of *Lady Sugar Finds Love*. But Evelyn didn't think she would find love here.

"Where are we?"

She couldn't stop the note of panic that entered her voice.

Matthew spared her only a fleeting glance. "I need to make preparations before we leave. If you had not run away when you had, you might have known."

Evelyn harrumphed. "I reject that statement. I did not run away."

"Oh? My apologies then, what would you call it?"

Evelyn wanted wipe that smirk from his handsome face. It was as though he had won some mysterious battle. Something was becoming very clear, however; he was not taking her home. Which, she thought bitterly, he couldn't since he did not know where she was headed.

"Preparations be damned. I am leaving for my aunt's," she forced out through clenched teeth.

Matthew lifted one dark brow in a mocking gesture. "She lives at the White Horse in Bristol?"

Evelyn sputtered. "No! That was a mistake. I never intended to go to Bristol."

"Be that as it may, there are still preparations to be made."

"What preparations?" she asked, exasperated.

"Why, for our marriage of course."

"I beg your pardon?"

He spoke slowly, as if he thought she would not understand a word he said. "You are ruined, Evelyn. You spent a night in my bed, ran around half naked in my presence and you kissed me."

"Nobody knows any of that!"

"I know."

"I am betrothed!"

"You are not." He regarded her sternly before he finished, "Anymore."

Evelyn wanted to stomp her foot in exasperation. She did not need to be reminded of her actions, but neither was she going to marry him out of some misguided sense of duty.

"You can't really mean to marry me! We hardly know one another."

She let tears form in her eyes, in hope to needle this insufferable, arrogant man with the most powerful weapon women have used for centuries. He seemed rather immune however, like he was not the sort of man to react to something as tedious as someone else's feelings.

"We are attracted to one another. Marriages have been based on far less."

A look of pure horror overcame Evelyn. "Attraction? You would base your marriage on nothing but attraction?"

He shot her glance, his eyes alive with fire. "Is that not what you are doing with St. Aldwyn?"

Drat. Of course. Her *engagement*.

"That is different!"

Matthew said nothing, just glared at her.

She continued, "I won't marry you, no matter what you do."

His face turned dark. "Yet you would marry St. Aldwyn, for what? Love? Naïve, Evelyn, is what you are."

Evelyn gave a hollow laugh. "Oh I'm not naïve, Mr. Langdon. I know all too well the cruelties of our world. Perhaps not first hand, but I have seen people who would do anything to gain what they seek, all in the name of love. For many it's just a means to an end, but not for all."

Her remark struck home. Charlotte had done that—abused the emotion to gain what she sought. She knew how to work a man and their weaknesses. And he had been no different than any other. At first he'd been cautious, perhaps even more so than most, but eventually he had succumbed. Then he had believed the lies of love she had whispered into his ear, the promises of forever. After he had seen her for the fraud that she was, he had shut himself out from the world, putting up armor as thick as a wall.

"Yes," he agreed in a harsh voice. "At least we agree on something."

"I will not marry you."

He did not answer.

Evelyn regarded him for a moment that lasted precisely four heartbeats, considering how best to proceed. Finally she said, "Not everyone is like her."

Still no answer.

So he was determined to ignore her now, was he? Well she refused to be ignored.

“Granted, I find you very appealing *now*, but one day you will be bald and pudgy, and I will be fat and wrinkled. The attraction, as you put it, will be gone.” Seeing the ‘are you done now’ look he shot her way she continued, “And as you are much older than I am, my attention might be pulled elsewhere where attraction is concerned.”

That got his attention.

“I would kill anyone who dared to touch you.”

Evelyn’s lips pulled up in a wicked smile. “I believe there is a saying that goes something like: what you are not aware off, cannot kill me.”

His mouth settled in a firm line as he continued to glare at her smiling face.

“I will not marry an old fart,” Evelyn stated clearly.

“I am not an old fart,” Matthew bit out.

She just lifted an infuriating, albeit delicate, brow.

“Would you stop spouting such drivel? I will not change my mind,” he said flatly, unfazed by her attempts to make him change his mind or even mock him. Damn, but now he even felt like an old fart.

Evelyn almost barred her teeth at him. He was such a hothead. “And that is my point, what about my mind? Do I not get a say in the matter?”

Matthew pinched the bridge of his nose. “You made your decision when you climbed into my bed.”

She snorted her opinion. “I was hardly in any state to make life changing decisions.”

Matthew snorted in return. “I’ll say. That is exactly why you need a husband.”

Evelyn seethed at that. “That’s it! You miserable rotter! If your male prowess had even begun to match that mouth of yours perhaps we would still be back at the Inn!” Evelyn shouted, breathing hard. She regretted her insult immediately as Matthew’s face reddened at her words, his eyes narrowing on her threateningly.

Oh dear.

In hindsight she should have realized it would have been safer to poke a bear with a stick. And before she could even think to take back her words she was grabbed in a painful grip and pulled against his hard chest. His lips crushed against hers with a brute intensity as she hopelessly tried to push away from him.

Matthew felt her struggle against his assault but would not give way. She attempted to turn her head away, but he would not allow it. Something deep and primal lurking within him since he saw her dressed in men’s clothing now urged him to possess her, to make her

surrender to him.

To his satisfaction she slowly relented, and he deepened the kiss when she pressed deeper into him. Cupping her buttocks he lifted her higher against his hardness so that she could feel his de-sire.

When the carriage suddenly rocked to a stop, Evelyn shoved against his chest.

He let her go. Falling back into her seat she looked delectable with her swollen lips and tousled hair, desire still running hot in his blood.

"This isn't over, sweetheart," he drawled before the carriage door opened and he jumped out.

Evelyn's hands trembled uncontrollably as she watched Matthew hop out of the carriage. Damn him for being so irresistibly, mouthwatering, skirt-hiking, knee wobblingly male. The door widened and he stood there with an arrogantly raised brow, his ever present serious air in place once more.

He held out his hand.

Evelyn's gaze darted for something she could hold onto, anything to keep her from leaving the safe confines of the carriage.

"You can either take my hand sweetheart, or I'll throw you over my shoulder and carry you in myself," he challenged.

She pulled a face. He knew very well she would not make such a scene. Placing her hand in his he lifted her up into his arms, ignoring her cry of protest, his long strides taking them into the un-familiar residence before she could even blink an eyelash.

"Where are we?"

"The residence of a friend in Bath."

His stride never broke as he carried her through the main hall and up the main staircase. Her earlier suspicions returned as she studied him more closely. He was no mere Mr. Again a sense of familiarity washed over her but she pushed it away. He had all the attributes of a member of the aristocracy. It was in the way he walked as if the earth should tremble beneath his feet and an air of arrogance surrounded him like a cloak. Even his luxurious carriage.

Evelyn stilled as a thought struck her.

The carriage! There would be a crest on the side and she hadn't even thought to look for it. *The rotter*. He accused her of lying when all this time he'd lied to her as well.

Who was he really?

Matthew stopped at a closed door and gave her a look of vulnerable uncertainty. He appeared to want to say something but decided against it. Still Evelyn felt herself drowning in the depth of his gaze. His eyes never left hers as he opened the door and stepped inside. Perhaps he had woven a spell around her, but whatever it was; it was

broken with the resounding shut of the door.

“Put me down,” Evelyn said as she started to squirm in his arms. To her surprise he let her go.

She studied the room he’d brought her to. It was dark and spacious with tasteful color, but that was where it stopped. There were no personal items to give the room any kind of personality. The only thing that looked inviting was the bed. In fact, the bed was the only furniture in the room, and it was covered in red satin sheets.

All the windows in the room were covered as well, so that no light entered. This won’t do at all. Evelyn took a step away from him and would have given him a piece of her mind, but when their eyes locked all sense of self-preservation vanished. A look of intense possession reflected in his eyes, held her spellbound. Her breath caught at the back of her throat. This was a man intent on seduction.

He pushed away from the door and closed the distance between them, but he did not touch her.

She looked up at him and stuttered, “I need to... that is...”

He stopped her with the soft touch of a finger on her lips. Then he bent his head so that his lips were pressed against her ear and said in a hoarse voice, “You’re keeping secrets from me Evelyn. Trust me. Confide in me. Let us get the truth out in the open and clear the air between us.”

His words were compelling and seductive.

He met her gaze openly and her heart pinched at the vulnerability that lurked in those ancient green eyes.

Still she could not give up the truth. “There is nothing to tell.”

Oh how she wanted to! But what if her identity became known and she lost her freedom only to become just another lady trapped in a gilded cage? What if he whispered promises that he had no intention of keeping? She wanted to explore the cultures of Africa, stand before the pyramids of Egypt and sip on Turkish coffee, in Turkey.

Yet in the presence of this man Evelyn had to remind herself that she wasn’t the only one with secrets.

“I don’t believe you.”

His lips found hers. Panic and desire pulsed through her as he pulled her closer against his hard body. Her heartbeat increased rapidly as her mind fought frantically what to do. Her traitorous heart wanted to throw caution to the wind while her rational mind wanted her to run away as fast as she could.

Her mind lost the battle.

She would follow her heart, this once, and her heart wanted to be seduced by him.

Pressing deeper into him she curled her fingers into his hair, only to groan when she felt the loss of his lips.

“Evelyn, if we don’t stop now, I won’t be able to.”

Odd words to say, Evelyn mused, since he’d brought her to this room in the first place.

“I don’t want you to stop.”

He lifted her chin so that their eyes met as he ran a finger down her cheek. “Are you sure you want this?”

Oh yes.

She nodded.

He groaned and dipped his head to kiss her again. Her lips yielded beneath his, easily parting for his tongue to slip inside and taste the warm wetness of her mouth. He meant to savor every inch of her. His hands slid up the length of her body, her curves well defined beneath the shirt and trousers. “I’m going to make love to every inch of your body, Evelyn,” he whispered. He leaned down and pressed soft kisses against the smooth skin of her neck, slowly getting rid of the offending material separating their bodies.

Once naked, his eyes devoured her lush flesh, and then returned to her face, watching her every expression. The air hit her exposed skin, and she shivered, until she caught sight of his nakedness—one part in particular. Evelyn was quite certain her mouth dropped open. No wonder he was so hard. Every inch of his body was muscle. Her gaze examined his chest before yet again settling at the most curious part of his body.

“Evelyn,” Matthew groaned as he scooped her up and laid her gently on the soft bed. “If you keep looking at me like that I will expire,” he said hoarsely as his lips moved against her neck and nipped. She moaned in reaction, a soft sensual sound that made shivers pulse through his body.

“This is your last chance. There is no turning back after this.”

Evelyn sucked in her breath. His eyes burned bright with desire and she was struck once again by how beautiful he was, his eyes holding her soul captive. He was giving her one last chance to stop, but she wanted him with a desperate need that scared her. Tomorrow she would kick herself and drown in her mistake, but today she would take this one chance she had to be with him.

“Please.”

Matthew dragged a finger down her throat, circling her breasts and then gently squeezing them.

“I’m going to give you so much pleasure, Evelyn,” he said as her fingers curled into the soft dark strands at his nape before making their way to his chest. She did not doubt that he would. He closed his mouth over her nipple and she felt she would burst into flames at any moment.

Whispered uttering reached her ears but she did not care to listen.

All she could think about was his tongue and the magic it made against her skin. His hand slid between her legs and she gasped at the sensation, arching off the bed. She smiled in satisfaction as his moan of pleasure reached her ears.

Then his finger slipped inside her, stroking her inner softness with a languid rhythm. Oh goodness. His devilry was beyond pleasurable.

He crouched over her and trailed kisses down her neck. "I want to be inside you," came his husky whisper. "You're so lovely, Evelyn." He nudged her legs apart and settled between her thighs. "I can't wait anymore, sweetheart." Evelyn didn't want him to speak anymore. She wanted him to make love to her.

Matthew stared down at her, his body shaking with need. He couldn't believe his reaction to this little slip of a woman. It shook him like nothing ever had.

Placing a gentle kiss on her nose, he nudged strongly into her, his eyes never leaving hers, cradling her body close to his as he felt her tense against his invasion. In one powerful thrust he broke through her barrier, soothing her with kisses when she stiffened in his arms.

Evelyn's nails dug into his skin as the pain slowly ebbed away, leaving only pleasure in its wake. She let her hands slide down to his chest as he started moving inside her, her legs wrapping around him. He continued to move forward, then pulled back, keeping a steady rhythm that made her want to go mad from desire and a need for something more. Impatient for something more she started moving with him, matching his thrusts and then it began to build inside her, a mounting pressure of... something else. She didn't know what it was; only that she wanted to hold on to that feeling.

"Evelyn," he growled in her ear, his thrust quickening. And then it came—an explosion erupted inside her, currents of heat that caused her to cry out in pleasure.

She felt his movements grow even more frenzied and then he too cried out, a low guttural sound, his as he spent himself inside her. His breathing hard he rained tender kisses down on her face, overcome by an emotion so intense he started to shake and deep inside him, something shattered.

He marveled at the beauty of her. Nothing in his life had ever compared to what he felt at this very moment.

"Promise me you won't leave again?" He whispered into her hair. "Promise me you will stay."

Evelyn nodded, curling up in his arms. She closed her eyes and drifted into a peaceful slumber, wishing that this moment could last forever.

Evelyn woke later alone in the large bedroom. Blinking sleepily, she propped herself up on one elbow, glancing at the empty space beside her. Never would she have imagined that being with a man, could have felt so magical and so pleasurable.

Matthew. His name was a soft whisper in her mind.

She'd promised not to leave, but could he really expect her to keep her word? Or her nod of agreement, as it was.

Dazed in the aftermath of their love making she would have promised him anything.

It felt like forever ago that she departed from London. So much had happened, and she felt caught up in the uncertainty of it all. Could she marry Matthew? He was almost enough to make her second guess her decision to remain unmarried. Almost.

So the answer remained no. The knowledge of that made matters infinitely worse. She had given in to his seduction without any intention of marriage. It made her no better than Damien or any other scoundrel who used desire for their own selfish gain. Gah! She had become the female equivalent of a rake. Yet she did not regret their night of marvelous passion.

She did however believe that what she and Matthew had shared was an act so beautiful, it should only be shared by a husband and wife in love, and not be wasted on meaningless entanglements, created so people could express their love to one another truthfully and intimately. Did she love Matthew? She cared for him certainly, but that did not mean she loved him?

Evelyn sighed heavily, falling back on the mattress. She had wanted this, had known what she was getting into, but one moment of passion did not determine the outcome of her future. The curious ache in her heart rather disagreed.

Nevertheless, Evelyn could not make a decision and he would never let her go if she stayed. She wasn't ready for what he wanted, what he demanded of her, so she had no choice but to break her nod of promise and leave.

Reluctantly rising from the warmth of the bed, she quickly dressed. Evelyn still didn't completely understand why Matthew was so determined that they marry. One thing was quite clear though, if his pursuit had been resolute at best after they shared a few kisses, he would be relentless now.

The night was eerily silent as she moved toward the door, her heart heavy and her steps hesitant. Creeping down the stairs was easy enough; it was the silence that unnerved her. There wasn't even a creak in the floor board. Where was Matthew?

Her footsteps silently padded along the hallway as she made her way to the front door. It would be locked so she would have to climb

through one of the windows in the waiting room. Rubbing her hands together in anticipation, her heart started to race in excitement. She felt like a spy out of a grand story.

Oh, she was created to be sneaky.

The room she entered had a wide array of windows encompassing the one side of the room. Splendid. Evelyn rushed to the nearest window, not bothering to study the room. She quickly un-hooked the latch, groaning as she strained to open it.

"Piece of cake, Evelyn," she croaked, before the window suddenly opened. With a breathless sigh she congratulated herself with a pat on her shoulder. Poking her head out of the window, Evelyn breathed in the fresh evening air. How delightful. Then she noticed the roses all along the side of the walls.

Not so delightful.

She would have to jump over them.

Positioning herself in a sitting position she inhaled a deep breath and counted to three.

One, two, three, jump!

She hit the ground with an ungraceful thud.

She straightened, giving her body a second to recover. The landing had been a bit harder than she expected. She glanced around, trying to make sense of where exactly she was. It looked familiar, but she couldn't be certain. Starting forward she wondered what would Matthew do if he found her now? The image was so unsettling that she quickly glanced up at the window and calculated the risk to climb back up again. No, that would not work. Perhaps knock on the front door? She shook her head. That wouldn't work either.

It was exhausting, this battle between her mind and heart; her practical side warring with her desires. Would she ever go back to being dull Evelyn again? Not that she thought she was dull, but everyone else seemed to.

After walking a few feet Evelyn recognized her surroundings. Her aunt lived not far from here. It was times like these that she wished she had paid better attention to gossip, because quite frankly, if she had she would have known precisely who this friend of Matthew's was. If it even was a friend.

The air had a cold bite as she approached the residence of her Aunt Agatha. Or perhaps that was the cold nip of panic, stabbing at her body like tiny daggers.

What explanation to give her aunt for arriving without her carriage, belongings, footman or maid? She could say they had been held up by robbers, and after her maid and footman had been slain, she had stolen the clothing of a boy which enabled her to escape her fate.

Or she could just say that the carriage had caught fire and all her

belongings were burned, then she'd traded her clothing for that of a boy's, because it afforded her more comfort, and her footman and maid fell in love and abandoned her for the open seas.

Oh stop with your wild imaginings, Evelyn! She berated herself. There were much more important things to do first, arriving home safely being one of them.

Evelyn stopped suddenly as her Aunt's home came into view. How odd, Evelyn thought, there was light coming from most of the ground floor windows. A shiver of trepidation ran down her spine. Was it possible her aunt was aware that Evelyn should have arrived days ago? That would mean Simon would be aware of her late arrival as well, which meant he would be here, or well on his way.

Evelyn hadn't even been aware her feet had moved until she stood a few feet away from the front door. Perhaps she should try to enter through the back unnoticed. That way she could find out what she would be dealing with and how explosive the situation.

The front door suddenly burst open, and a man came rushing out. He froze at the sight of her. She froze at the sight of him. They both regarded each other in stunned silence for what seemed an eternity before all hell broke loose.

"What the devil is going on?" he bellowed as he rushed down the steps toward her. "And why the hell are you dressed like a boy?"

Evelyn flinched. She would be surprised if the whole of Bath hadn't heard his bellowing. She contemplated turning on her heels and run as fast as she could in the opposite direction but her traitorous legs would not move.

"Why are you looking at me so funny?"

Evelyn heard the questions but was unable to make a sound, because looming over her with anger defining every strong line of his face, stood the last person she ever expected to see.

Her fake betrothed, Damien Grenville, the Marquis of St. Aldwyn.

Chapter 7

Evelyn stood in the drawing room staring into a pair of coal black eyes. They missed nothing, not even the dirt on her boots was overlooked.

“Have you been compromised?”

The question didn’t come as a shock. It was a fair assumption, but proved to be her undoing.

“Yes!” she cried out unable to stop herself. “I am completely and utterly ruined.”

She could tell by the widening of his eyes he had not expected her admission. The scorn would follow soon, she was sure of it, and not being able to stand the disappointment that would eventually follow, Evelyn rushed for the door, determined to lock herself in her room for the rest of her days. Unfortunately Damien was much faster than her and before Evelyn could even reach the door he slammed it shut, turning the lock in place.

She stared at him incredulously. “Are you mad?”

He caught her shoulders and gave her a gentle shake. “Yes, but my madness aside, I have questions that need answers. Or should we go pay a visit to your dear ignorant brother?”

Evelyn stilled. “Where is Simon?” she whispered in alarm.

“At home would be my guess.”

Wait, what? “Why are you here then?” she asked and then suspiciously, “And where is my aunt?”

Her hands went to her hips. Something was not quite right with this image.

“I had business to attend in the area and thought I would pop in for tea,” Damien explained with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Imagine my shock to not only learn your aunt has been away for weeks, and

that you never made it to Bath. Naturally I became concerned.”

“How did you know I would be in Bath?” Evelyn asked skeptically, still not certain whether to trust him. It seemed too remarkable that she’d named him as her fake betrothed and then he suddenly appeared as if he’d been summoned.

He gave her a pointed look. Evelyn nodded. Yes of course, Simon.

“Where is my aunt?” she asked again.

“Visiting a friend in Scotland, I am told.”

Evelyn’s brow furrowed. Drat. Aunt Agatha usually sent word whenever she left for Scotland. Perhaps she had, and Simon had forgotten about it? It seemed unlikely, but...

She crossed her arms. “You own no residence in Bath or the nearby area,” she held up her hand when he would have interrupted, “and why would you pop in for tea? You don’t strike me as the sort that drinks tea, let alone pops in for some.”

There was no hiding the suspicious note in her in her voice and for a brief moment (one Evelyn relished in) a look of utter surprise entered his sable eyes before it quickly disappeared.

“Lady Evelyn, have you been reading up on me?” he asked, a sly smile tugging on his lips, giving him the rakish appearance women so often fell in love with.

Evelyn had to admit it was quite distracting, not just his smile, but his presence in her home, where they were alone, behind a locked door.

“No.” But someone else has, though she didn’t voice that part. Oddly enough her mood had improved, her earlier outburst almost forgotten.

“You still haven’t answered my question.” She had an odd notion he knew exactly where she heard it. But that would be impossible.

“You never asked me a question, Lady Evelyn. You merely pointed out the fact that I don’t own any residences in or near the surrounding area.”

Evelyn blinked. He was right and with that the last of her doubt slowly disappeared. She would not jump to conclusions as she had with the note in Matthew’s pocket. Damien had no hidden agenda, and she had no need to be suspicious of him. There was also no denying the relief she felt that it had been Damien, and not her brother, that caught her.

“Will you tell me what happened that you,” he motioned to her attire, “ended up dressed like that?”

She gave a hesitant nod, a hint of a smile tugging at her lips. He was such a scoundrel, and he already knew she had been compromised. What harm could it be? The fact that this was Damien, Matthew’s arch enemy did not even matter. She was in desperate need to confide in

someone, and he would do just fine.

But could she trust him? Probably not.

Without further ado, she relayed every detail of what had transpired, from the moment her maid turned ill up to meeting Matthew and believing him to be a villain of sort. She even told him of her unfortunate lie, naming of him as her fake betrothed.

Up to that part he had listened in earnest, not once interrupting or laughing at her foolish behavior, but he blanched at that. She had to give him credit; he did not even make a sound when he motioned for her to continue after she hesitated, watching for his reaction. Without delay she finished her story with the tale of Bristol and being kidnapped (for lack of better word) by Matthew but did leave out the intimate details of her ultimate ruination.

Then he astonished her by doing the most unexpected thing. He pulled her into his embrace and hugged her, with a hold so tender she thought he might be afraid that she would shatter at his merest touch. They stood awkwardly for a moment, she stunned, he comforting, before her arms enfolded him back. He was warm and incredibly solid, holding her with all his strength.

Evelyn released a sigh of contentment. It felt good to be comforted, albeit strange that it came from him, but still good.

“Tsk-Tsk,” he murmured in a soft tone of voice, “everything will turn out for the best.”

Such tenderness and concern from a rake who rarely showed compassion was almost too incredible for Evelyn. Her lips turned upward, knowing that this was a once in a lifetime moment.

She looked up at him then. “I shall take your word for it,” she paused, then said, “and thank you for your kindness. It is rather sweet of you,” she finished with emphasis on the word sweet, and had to bite her lip to keep from laughing at his expression.

“Sweet,” Damien echoed, his mouth curling with disgust, as if the word appalled him. “I think—”

A loud hammering outside the drawing room interrupted him midsentence. Their startled gazes flew to the door. Then the hammering suddenly stopped, followed by shouting and something crashing against the wall.

“What the—”

“Evelyn!” A furious voice shouted.

Her blood ran cold, and she watched with a sinking heart as Damien’s eyes narrowed on the door.

“Evelyn!” The shout came again, followed by pounding on the door.

Evelyn stood frozen, her mind refusing all thoughts that it was Matthew shouting her name and pounding against their only exit.

“Is that who I think it is?” Damien asked her in what she could only

presume was disbelief.

“Who do you think it is?”

Her question was lost in another loud crash. Neither of them made a move toward the door or a sound that would make their presence known. The pounding on the door stopped again, and Evelyn let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. She pushed out of Damien’s embrace, but jumped closer when a loud crack sounded against the door. It almost sounded like a—

Another loud crack. Then another. One last deafening crack and suddenly Matthew stood in the doorway, the door hanging on its hinges. Evelyn couldn’t stop the gasp that escaped her lips at the sight of him. His jaw set in a harsh line, his teeth clenched tightly while his broad chest rose and fell in short labored breaths. Shoulders bunched like a warrior his fists clenched at his side.

Oh dear.

His gaze darted back and forth between her and Damien before it settled on her waist, which still had male arms around her. He glared at Damien as if he would like nothing more than to rip him to pieces. It was clear he did not like the picture they made for his eyes promised murder.

Somehow Evelyn pushed away from Damien and he let her go, his face an unreadable mask and his eyes devoid of emotion. A shiver of unease ran through her.

Then, Matthew’s penetrating gaze turned to her. She saw the flash of agony before it was gone. Her heart pinched.

“What are you doing, Evelyn?” he asked, his voice barely an audible whisper.

Her chest tightened. Anger she would have understood, she had made a promise, but this heartbroken question, it scorched her soul. She could no more answer than she could set herself on fire.

Her fake betrothed regarded her with laid back interest, obviously expecting her to answer the question, amusement apparent in his bearing. The devil.

“I came to collect some belongings?” Evelyn lamely attempted to lighten the mood.

If anything, his face became even harsher, his eyes shooting daggers at them.

“It would seem that I have interrupted an intimate moment,” he growled, his breath coming out in harsh gasps. Noticeable tremors racked his body.

“Matthew—”

“Enough Evelyn! Enough of your lies!” he roared.

He took a step forward.

She took a step back.

There was nothing she could say that would not add to his fury. He was beyond all reasoning. By leaving, when she let him believe she would not, she had pushed him over the edge.

“Do you have nothing to say?”

Why yes, she had plenty to say. Only she did not think it would be in the best interest of her health to do so. Apparently Damien thought so as well. She spared him a quizzical look when he stepped closer to her and then blinked when he winked at her.

Stunned she watched him face Matthew with a seriousness that could not have been real. The man had just winked at her!

“Settle your feathers, Grey. Obviously there is more to the story than what you witnessed. Why don’t we all just sit down and discuss this like adults?”

Grey?

“You can do as you like St. Aldwyn,” Matthew practically shouted. “What I would like to know,” he said raking his murderous eyes over Evelyn, “is why you left my bed in the dead of the night to be with him?”

“Have you not heard the happy news?” Damien asked in a syrupy voice laced with sarcasm, “I have become betrothed.”

Evelyn felt her cheeks flame at Matthew’s crude question and Damien’s ill-humored reminder of her lie. She would punch the scoundrel later. But Matthew, did he truly believe she was that sort of woman? Of course he did. She had so effectively weaved a web of lies that she was now caught in her own tangle.

Then a spark of recognition ignited at Damien’s earlier reference to Matthew.

“Grey? As in the Earl of Grey?” she asked incredulously, glancing at Damien for confirmation when Matthew only stiffened.

“You didn’t know who he was?” Damien asked as confusion lit his brow.

“I...”

And just like that everything suddenly made sense. The whisper of familiarity that never seemed far away, that he stood in her home at this very moment, the reason he felt a sense of duty toward her. She recalled (somewhat vaguely) that he and Simon had once been close friends, together with Damien, if she was not mistaken. He’d left London about six years ago, which is why Evelyn hadn’t recognized him. She would have only been fifteen, not yet presented to society and it wasn’t often that Simon visited home with his friends.

Her eyes met Matthew’s in full recognition. “All this time, you knew who I was?” Her voice sounded foreign even to her own ears.

He didn’t look away as he said, “No, I learned your identity after I left the Inn, but I had my suspicions.”

That still meant he had known when he'd found her in Bristol, and when he'd seduced her.

Something fractured inside her. It was hard to say exactly what, but anger clouded her vision. "You cad! You seduced me knowing who I was!"

Her outburst only enraged him further. "I gave you ample time to come forth with the truth. The only thing, it seemed, that you didn't lie about was being betrothed to him."

Evelyn winced. Granted it must look rather bad, she and Damien together, especially since her aunt wasn't in residence. Add the fact that it had been Damien who'd betrayed him all those years ago, made it all the more horrid. But he had lied as well.

He gave a humorous laugh. "So you were travelling to Bath to meet you lover after all."

"You know that's not true," Evelyn said softly.

He ignored her. "Is this the type of woman you are? Bedding one man while betrothed to another?"

Evelyn gasped as her eyes darted between the two men. His hostile tone immediately brought a chill to the room.

Damien growled, the twitch in his jaw belying his calm demeanor.

"You will apologize. Right. Now."

Evelyn stared at them, at once understanding that betrayal wasn't the only reason why these two men hated each other.

Charlotte.

The name drifted through her mind with painful clarity. This was not about her. It never had been. Matthew did not care whether she left him or not. But it galled him to no end that it was Damien she was leaving him for. She was just a pawn, a means to an end.

Distantly she became aware that the men were now shouting at one another, but paid them no mind. Her thoughts were crowded by the faceless woman named Charlotte.

"Are you challenging me to a duel?" Damien asked incredulous.

"Name your second," Matthew growled.

Evelyn's painful woolgathering evaporated, replaced by stunned horror.

"What are—" she started to say but Damien cut her off.

"Why don't you just leave?"

"Gladly," Matthew hissed back, "but not without her." He jabbed a finger in Evelyn's direction.

Damien shrugged. "Swords it is."

"Stop it!" Evelyn cried out, rushing forward to stand between them.

"This is absurd!"

Matthew glared at her. "Absurd was to trust you not to leave me again!"

"Damn you both!" she shouted. "This isn't about me, this is about Charlotte! What is it about her that makes it impossible for you to let go?"

For a moment both men were taken aback by her statement.

Matthew stiffened but ignored her words. Holding his hand out, he snapped, "We're leaving, now."

Evelyn took a step back. "No."

"I'm not leaving you alone with him."

Evelyn shook her head. "You have no choice. I'm not leaving with you."

"Over. My. Dead. Body."

"That can be arranged," Damien drawled.

Evelyn stood momentarily in shock at his outburst, or hers, she wasn't quite certain. Tears gathered in her eyes but she blinked them away.

"I hope he runs you through," she whispered harshly, wiping blindly at her eyes now. Matthew had the gall to look surprised at her words but she did not care. All that mattered was leaving. Without further thought Evelyn darted to the left, slipped passed Matthew and out the door.

Damien eyed his former friend in disgust. "Does she matter so little to you?"

A spark of fire entered Matthew's eyes. "Obviously she matters or I wouldn't be here." He wanted nothing more than to follow her but he had unfinished business here with the man standing across from him.

"Well, aren't you a bundle of joy. No wonder she ran away from you," Damien bated, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

He'd hit a nerve. "Name your second St. Aldwyn!"

"Forget it," Damien said disgusted. "If this duel had been over Evelyn, I would gladly run you through. Clearly she had a point about this not being over her, and I'm not wasting my time over a whore."

It took all of Matthew's strength not to attack the bastard. "I should have killed you six years ago."

"Why didn't you?" Damien asked snidely.

A flicker of emotion passed across Matthew's face, and before Damien could put a name to it his cold mask was back in place.

"We all make mistakes."

"Yes," Damien replied. "We all do."

An hour later Damien found a pale Evelyn sitting at the table in the breakfast room, which was decorated in an alarming shade of purple. His heart went out to her. She looked so crest fallen, staring at nothing in particular, engrossed in her own thoughts.

"I thought you'd be asleep," he murmured, leaning against the wall.

Evelyn tilted her head his way.

He let out a string of curses when he saw she had been crying.

"I couldn't sleep," she said in way of explanation.

"Neither could I."

She gave a single nod. "Is he still here?"

Matthew hadn't run after her when she stormed out of the drawing room earlier, but soon caught up to her and stood guard at her door after she slammed it in his face. He had not even tried to gain entrance. She'd sunk to the floor, her back to the door and just sat there, her mind numb.

"...left a short while ago."

Oh Good. "I'm surprised he actually left, knowing you are lurking about."

Damien gave a humorless laugh and nodded toward a maid, who pretended not to notice them as she cleaned something furiously.

Understanding dawned.

"I see, I guess that settles that."

"What are you going to do?" he asked as he took a seat beside her. "Would you like me to smuggle you out of county? I hear Greece is lovely this time of year."

Evelyn smothered a laugh. "Please."

"On my honor, if that is what you want, I would."

Evelyn regarded him curiously. What a conundrum of contradictions this man had turned out to be. And Greece did sound lovely, but she had the distinct impression that Matthew would hunt her down to the ends of the earth.

"Are you going to tell Simon?" she asked instead.

He seemed to consider her question and Evelyn knew it would go against his nature to lie to his friend, especially if that lie was in his interest to know.

"If you had been my sister I would have wanted to be informed. I would also have killed the man and asked questions after the fact."

Evelyn's stomach twisted in a tight knot. Her brother would be so disappointed. He had always trusted her, and now she had betrayed that trust. She only hoped he wouldn't force her to marry. She sighed, resting her head in her hands.

To get back at Damien for a betrayal six years ago, Matthew had and would use her. Her heart pinched in her chest but she remained strong. Later she would rant and rave over the unfairness of it all.

Had she not known the risks when she gave into the seductive pull of her desires? Yet not in her wildest imaginations would she have thought she'd be marrying a man that loved another woman. Not she, an incurable romantic in love with the world, besides she wasn't ready to give up her dreams for travel. Not when she still had a lifetime of

adventures ahead of her.

The Earl, on the other hand, was a recluse who preferred to remain at his country estate, rarely if at all venturing out to London, or anywhere else. Evelyn would wither away in such a reclusive existence. If she married and was forced into a life of solitude, she would always run away from that fate. Yet how was she to escape this future? It seemed an impossible endeavor, for any choice she made included her running away.

And then there was Damien. She studied him from beneath her lashes. What was he about? His usual air of amusement was gone, replaced by wariness and a guarded air of watchfulness. He appeared rather sad. And if her suspicion proved correct, his guise hid profound pain and emptiness.

"I think—" he began but paused before continuing, "It would be better if Simon was left in the dark for now."

Evelyn blinked, confusion lit her brow.

"You would you do that for me?"

He gave her a pointed look. "Not only will Simon blister your behind, he will—"

"No," Evelyn interrupted on a laugh. "You would you do this for me?"

He hesitated before he answered, "I— Well— We all deserve to decide own future. And I would hate to see you forced into a marriage that would make you unhappy. Regrettably, I cannot speak for Grey. He could be on his way to Simon as we speak." His voice held a stern note when he continued, "But I will observe and if I have one hint of suspicion that something underhanded is happening, I will tell your brother and blister your behind myself."

A smile spread across Evelyn's face. Before she could think better of it she launched herself at Damien, giving him a big bear hug.

"Thank you," she whispered as she released him.

A bitter voice interrupted from the doorway, the sharpness of it piercing the room like a dagger in one's gut. "I seem to have interrupted a private moment, yet again."

With slow languid movements Evelyn rose to face the beast that would entrap her. He stood in the doorway, his gaze unreadable as he regarded her. Evelyn wasn't fooled.

"You seem to do that a lot," she shot back, deciding she would try another hand at sleep, after all.

He blocked her way. "Where the hell are you going?" he snapped when she would have passed him.

"I am tired and need sleep," Evelyn said glaring at him. "Kindly step aside, sir."

She knew it would not escape his notice that she refrained from

explaining yet another private moment interrupted. Ha! He did not deserve one.

Matthew studied the wary lines of her face. He felt tense and even a little wild. He hated that he had been the one to cause those lines, but damn it, she was the one who ran away from him.

“Good,” he said with a nod. “We will make all the arrangements later today.”

She nodded, then stilled. “There are no arrangements to be made.” Her words were a mixture of wariness and determination.

“There is our wedding.”

Her heart lurched. “I will not marry you.”

He took a threatening step forward as his gaze shifted between her and his rival and back again.

Damien rose in deliberate movements from his seat.

“I’m not giving you a choice. You did not believe I’d let you run off and marry this bastard?”

Evelyn scowled. She wanted to punch him for his arrogance. “I will run off with whomever I choose!”

“Over my dead body you will! I won’t let this bastard raise my child!”

A small gasp escaped her parted lips. “Child?”

“Yes, Evelyn,” he bit out, furious that she would dare to contemplate running off with anybody except him. “You could be carrying my child. Or did you not even consider that possibility?”

Damien, who had been silent up till now, gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “I would be more than happy to raise any child of yours Evelyn. That is if you will still marry me.”

Evelyn’s jaw dropped at those words. Had he just proposed? Or was he only goading the lion?

“The hell she will!” Matthew roared as his fist flew, hitting Damien square in the jaw.

The next moment—to Evelyn’s utter shock—they both hit the floor and she winced as flesh pounded flesh.

“Oh!” She screamed after her initial shock melted away in the wake of utter exasperation and threw her hands in the air. “You both are impossible.”

She moved passed them, determined to get away from their brawling before she lost what little sanity she had left. At the door she paused however, and with one last parting shot said, “Oh and by the by, Damien and I are not betrothed!”

They froze mid brawl as her words washed over them like a bucket of iced water.

Matthew, suddenly on his feet, shouted after her, “Get back here, Evelyn!”

Damien, who thought he would give chase, tackled him to the ground again.

They could both go to the devil! She would not be here when he returned after he'd made his *arrangements*. She will have made arrangements of her own, and they did not include him and his insufferable arrogance. Perhaps she would travel to the Middle East. Ha! She would like to see him try to find her then!

By the time Matthew and Damien finished pounding into each other, most of their anger had dissipated. All Matthew wanted to do now was retrieve Evelyn and whisk her away to a place where there would be no interruptions, no lies. But he wouldn't, not yet. She needed rest, and he was still too angry to be civil. Damn, if that woman hadn't lied through her teeth about being be-trothed as well.

Still, his next words needed to be said, or growled, "If you ever touch her again, I will rip your heart out and shove it down your throat."

Damien lifted an incredulous brow. "Now you play the jealous lover?"

"I am not playing anything," Matthew bit out. "I will kill you if you take her from me. I will hunt you down and rip you apart."

Damien snorted, touching his left eye that was rapidly starting to swell. "She won't be forced into marriage."

Matthew shrugged in return. "She should have thought of that before she gave me her innocence."

"You've changed," Damien noted.

"You haven't," Matthew shot back.

Damien let out a heavy sigh. "I never meant for things to turn out the way they did. Charlotte—"

"It doesn't matter," Matthew cut him off. "It hasn't for a long time."

"If you say so."

"Why are you here St. Aldwyn, when Westfield is not?"

Damien shrugged. "I am a family friend, Grey, more than can be said about you." He watched with shrewd eyes as his former friend turned and stalk away and baited, "You still hate me then, I take it."

Matthew paused by the door but did not glance back. "I don't care what relationship you have with Evelyn, it's over."

"She is a friend."

"Former friend," Matthew corrected.

"Does she not get a choice in the matter?"

"Where you are concerned, there is no choice but mine."

A mirthless laugh ripped from Damien's throat. "You cannot keep us from attending the same functions."

"I won't have to," Matthew shot back with a glare. "Once we are

married we will retire to my country estate where you will never set eyes on her again.”

“By saint’s man,” Damien shot him an incredulous look, “you cannot imprison your own wife.”

“Watch me.”

Matthew stalked out unaware that Evelyn had heard the entire exchange. Damien, who had been aware of Evelyn skulking in the shadows, watched her small frame hesitantly make her way toward him, her skin deathly pale.

She spoke unsteadily but her words were clear, “I cannot marry him.”

“I know, darling. I know.”

Chapter 8

Evelyn entered the drawing room a few hours later with some trepidation. Matthew had yet to return and while that was a relief, it unnerved her that he was out and about, making arrangements. Then there were the servants who kept hovering about, keeping stock of her every move. It was all incredibly ridiculous.

She hadn't the slightest notion what his plans entailed, other than her imprisonment, but the Earl would drag her to the country where he thought she would sit idly by, embroidering, for rest of her life? She would do everything humanly possible to avoid such an outcome.

He might still press his suit with Simon, but she wasn't too worried about that. Simon might rant and rave and be highly disappointed in her actions, but he would not force her into a marriage that would make her unhappy. She held onto that belief for dear life. Nevertheless, she would return to London, post haste. If anyone learned that she had arrived in Bath, with her Aunt out of residence, her reputation would come into question and it would make it easier for the Earl to press his suit.

Granted, that might still not be enough to stop him from forging on with his plans and there were numerous ways to secure her hand in marriage, like kidnapping, which he had already proved he was not above.

With a heavy sigh Evelyn propped down on the chaise, her arms resting at her sides as she laid her head back against the soft material, her lashes dropping. Ah bliss. Sleep had been an elusive mistress, but this would do just fine.

"Evelyn!"

Her eyes popped open at the sound of her name being called in excitement, bringing her out of her reverie. A smile of delight and

disbelief lit her face when she saw her friends, Lady Josephine and Lady Belle, rush into the drawing room.

“Jo! Belle!” She shot up from the chaise. “What are you doing here?”

Jo reached her first, embracing her in a hug. “When St. Aldwyn realized you’d never reached Bath he sent for us immediately. So here we are! And we have come to escort you back!”

Evelyn withdrew and regarded them with suspicion. “He did?”

“Yes,” Belle said kissing her on the cheek. “We are to be your shield should any unusual questions be asked about your departure.” Belle winked at her.

Dumfounded, Evelyn asked with a furrowed brow, “But how did you get here so soon?”

They both paused. “Well, we were on our way to you already,” Jo admitted finally.

“You were?” Evelyn asked even more confused than before.

“Well, when we heard of St. Aldwyn’s sudden departure, which happened to coincide with yours, we became curious.”

“Why? Was there something odd about his departure?”

Jo’s eyes turned serious. “The wager of Lord Harry on your dowry was just too remarkable, he is not destitute, you see.”

Belle nodded, her head bobbing up and down excitedly. “So we decided to investigate.”

“Oh,” Evelyn said overwhelmed by all this information. “What did you find?”

“Nothing,” Jo said in disgust.

“Yes, St. Aldwyn is as clever as they come,” Belle put in grudgingly.

If the notion wasn’t so ridiculous Evelyn might suspect St. Aldwyn was spying on her. Or perhaps stalking her? No, he could not possibly be stalking her. That was to say it wasn’t out of the realm of possibilities, but rather doubtful. Besides, he seemed sincere. Furthermore it seemed ridiculous that he could have been part of some plot, along with Lord Harry. What could any of them hope to gain?

“St. Aldwyn said he had business to attend in the area,” Evelyn offered helpfully.

Jo snorted.

Belle on the other hand gave Evelyn a wicked smile. “And then we arrived to learn that you were indeed compromised by the Earl of Grey. A notorious recluse everyone only whispers about, too afraid he might appear at the mere mention of his name.”

Evelyn gave them a level stare. “I take it Damien offered up that piece of information?”

Jo touched her arm in comfort. “He is concerned for your reputation.

Is it true? Because we won't believe him if you say it's not."

"I believed it instantly," Belle proclaimed in a bold statement.

Jo shot a reprimanding look her way.

"It's true," Evelyn confessed.

"Ha! I knew it!"

"Belle!" Jo admonished before turning her attention back to Evelyn.

"We are returning you to London, so that any rumors that might surface are quelled," Jo finished firmly.

"Rumors?" Evelyn asked lamely. There were rumors?

"There are no rumors yet," Jo put in quickly.

"But there could be," Belle remarked on a nod. "That is to say if you aren't planning to elope with the Earl."

Evelyn's stomach jolted. No. "I'm not wedding him, but he will try to force my hand."

"Would it be so bad, Evelyn?" Jo asked with a gentle touch to her arm.

Yes! "He intends to isolate me in the country on his estate."

"What!" Belle gasped in outrage. "That bloody rotter!"

"Darn it!" Jo voiced as well. "Tell us everything."

She had no choice in the matter; they would hound her until they have devoured every detail of her reckless adventure. And she was glad of it.

"Very well, but I will tell you all on the way back to London. The sooner we leave the better for us all."

"Splendid," Belle said, smiling at her. "Let us leave then."

"Yes, let's." Evelyn's eyes sparkled at them. She felt her spirits rise for what seemed to be the first time since she left London. Life was always better when her friends were around.

"Yes of course," Jo said motioning her hand to the door. "The carriage is waiting. St. Aldwyn warned us that a hasty departure might be prudent."

"Of course he did," Evelyn muttered, turning to leave, but hesitated when her friends remained motionless.

"Is something amiss?"

Wide eyes examined her from head to toe.

"Er, what are you wearing?" Jo asked with a tilt of her head.

Evelyn glanced down at her clothes. Oh! She still wore the clothing Tom had provided. But where it had once been unstained and neat it was now rumpled and dirty from her adventure.

"The most comfortable clothing you will ever come across!" she replied on a laugh.

Jo and Belle glanced at each other in wonder and disbelief.

"Well, I daresay this should make for an interesting ride home."

Matthew paced the length of the front hall waiting for someone to tell him where Evelyn was. Apprehension formed in the pit of his stomach when nobody could answer that simple question and a feeling of foreboding crept up his spine. It was the same feeling that led to his bursting into her home and demanding to see her.

Earlier he'd forced himself not to go to her and take her into his arms, reassuring her that everything would be fine. He hadn't even been angry that she'd lied about being betrothed to St. Aldwyn; his relief too great. Perhaps if he followed her, then he would not have this sense... that he was losing her.

Matthew came to an abrupt halt upon seeing Damien appear at the top of the staircase, a note clenched in his hand. A cautious air surrounded him and Matthew didn't miss the flicker of pity that flashed in his eyes before it was gone.

"You bastard," he bit out, his face devoid of expression. "You did this. You arranged this."

"I admit I did not stop her from leaving," Damien replied as he descended the stairs. He handed the note to Grey. "But it remained her choice."

While his former friend read the note, Damien thought back to his exchange with the beguiling Lady Josephine.

"We are leaving," she said as she drew closer, a hint of censure in her voice.

Damien's hairs rose on his neck rise at her regard. He had the distinct impression that she found him lacking in every possible way. Had he not warned her it would be beneficial for all parties involved to make a hasty departure? Vexing woman.

He hadn't mentioned his reasons for wanting Evelyn to return to London and that it had nothing to do with keeping her from Grey. Quite the opposite actually, it had been far too long since Grey had left the confines of his estate, and now that he had, Damien was eager to use it to his advantage.

But women were notorious trouble-makers, and the impression he got from Lady Josephine was exactly that. Trouble. He even asked her what they were up to, just to ruffle her priggish feathers. They would close rank around Lady Evelyn now, but that had been part his plan. Grey needed to let go of the past, and if Damien had seen one thing this day, it was that Lady Evelyn possessed the means to bring Grey back from the abyss.

He watched as Grey read the note for the third time and hid a smile. Why try and figure out holier-than-thou Lady Josephine when he only needed to sit back and watch events unfold.

"Damnation!" Matthew growled, breaking Damien's chain of thought.

“She went back to London! Damn it all to hell!”

“That is where you will drag her after you force her to marry you, no doubt.”

“Go to hell.”

“I’m already there, old friend.”

Matthew cast him a scathing look. “We are not friends.”

“Perhaps it’s all for the best,” Damien said, unaffected by his denial.

“The best,” Matthew whispered softly, so dangerously Damien *almost* shivered, “would have been if you were never born.”

Three days later

“I still cannot believe that when you said you were leaving to visit your Aunt in Bath, it would be so... adventurous,” Lady Josephine murmured, stretching out on the bed beside Evelyn and Belle.

Evelyn clutched a pillow against her chest and regarded her friends with warmth. They had been nothing but supportive since she regaled them with her tale.

“Well, I for one can’t wait to fall in love and have my own adventure,” Belle said on a wistful note, a dreamy expression entering her gaze.

Jo gave an unladylike snort. “You fall in love every day and never with the same man, might I add.”

“True,” Belle replied with a sniff. Her complexion that was normally porcelain now resembled a fiery sunset. “I am merely searching for Mr. Unbelievably Handsome and unfailingly interesting that can hold my attention for longer than a day. Although I am beginning to suspect that no man will ever wear the title.” She leaned forward and although they were the only ones in the room, she lowered her voice. “In fact, as of now, I am changing the title from Mr. Unbelievably Handsome to Mr. Dark Brooding Rake.” Belle tried to sound serious but failed. “I might as well have fun becoming an old crone!”

“Don’t forget unfailingly interesting,” Evelyn said on a laugh.

“Belle! How indecent!” Jo replied laughing as well. “Dark, brooding rakes of the ton beware!”

Evelyn grinned at their foolishness and wished she shared their light spirits. Matthew, however, still weighed heavily on her heart.

“Be careful Belle, some of those rakes have no hearts,” Evelyn warned.

Belle’s smile deepened. “As I have absolutely no intention of giving them my heart, I would say I’m—”

“Destined to be ruined?” Jo finished her sentence.

Belle laughed.

Evelyn swatted Belle playfully. “I don’t know Jo, I’ve yet to see a situation Belle couldn’t wiggle out from.”

It was the truth.

“Yes, but there has never been a rake involved,” Jo’s voice trailed with a touch of seriousness.

Evelyn nodded in agreement. “That would make it all the more interesting to see.”

“Care to wager on that?” Jo shot back, a twinkle in her eye.

Belle sat back and regarded her friends in thought. “I could very well wager on that,” she said after a moment. “Besides, I’m not looking for Mr. Dark Brooding Rake’s heart. He can keep that all to himself as long as I get to have the rest of him.”

Jo’s amazed gaze shifted to Evelyn. “Could you stop this madness?”

“Impossible. She enjoys her madness,” shooting an apologetic glance in Belle’s direction Evelyn continued, a smile spreading across her face, “but my money is on Jo.”

“Such a loyal friend you are,” Belle replied in a mocking tone.

As all of them shared a laugh, Evelyn reflected that for the first time in three days she felt happy. That is, except for the heaviness she carried in her heart. A sudden image of Matthew brought her up short. His handsome face hovering above hers and kissing her with heated passion.

The memory evaporated when she heard Jo’s matter-of-fact tone. “...definitely going to lose the wager, but first we help you get out this mess.” She touched Evelyn’s hand.

This mess, as Jo so eloquently put it, was the reason Evelyn tossed and turned at night. Since arriving back in London she’d expected Matthew to jump out at every corner. He hadn’t, yet.

It was mere luck that her brother had departed to attend business elsewhere. However, Evelyn suspected his business ran more in the way of a willing young widow.

“Why don’t you just marry Lord Grey? He’s an Earl and rumored to be very rich,” Belle asked in a breathless voice, a wicked gleam in her eyes. “He is also quite dashing. I would imagine he’s quite wicked too.”

“Belle!” Jo scolded with a shocked expression.

“You are not helping matters. Evelyn has already explained why she will not marry him—although Belle has a point,” Jo glanced expectantly at Evelyn.

Evelyn’s eyes narrowed, and she glared at her friends. “I have made my decision. I will not change my mind.”

Belle cleared her throat. “So what did you have in mind then? You can always elope with a stranger, but that would get you shackled to another stranger. Or you can run away to another continent. A little cottage in Tuscany might be nice.” Belle still had a dreamy expression in her eyes.

“Oh! I have an idea!” Jo clapped her hands. Her eyes twinkled with mischief. “You said he would follow you to London, right?”

“He might follow, yes.”

“Oh, he’ll come,” Belle put in with a nod.

Evelyn did not see what relevance it had, but she nodded anyway.

“Have you ever considered that perhaps the only way to make him understand that you will never marry him is to embark on a wild affair with St. Aldwyn?”

That caught her attention. What an absolutely horrifying notion. An affair with St. Aldwyn? Never. It would be Charlotte all over again. She might not want to marry Matthew, but she respected him and would sooner jump into the Thames than hurt him in such a way.

“No,” Evelyn said adamantly. “There will be no seducing St. Aldwyn.”

Jo gave a satisfied nod. “I propose you elope then.”

“I beg your pardon?” Evelyn asked sending her a confused frown.

Belle arched a delicate brow, “Oh, what a brilliant, idiotic plan. Did we not already establish elopement is out of the question?”

She shot Belle a glare. “Oh just shush and listen!” Jo gushed. “You elope, move to the continent and live out your dreams in peace,” Jo explained to Evelyn.

“Ah yes, the plan reveals itself,” Belle said with a roll of her eyes. “And who might this mystery man be that will leave everything and move to another country and,” she said holding up her hand when Jo would have interrupted, “who is to say this mystery man will not demand she return to London with him the minute they are married.”

“Exactly,” Evelyn agreed. She did not like this plan one bit.

“That is the best part,” Jo replied calmly. “There is no mystery man! In fact, that is what makes this plan so brilliant. There is no man.”

Evelyn and Belle stared at her as though she’d grown horns.

“I elope with a... woman?”

Jo glared at them in irritation. “Don’t be ridiculous! There is no man, there is no woman, and there is no elopement! There is only the illusion of one.”

Jo continued to glare at them, waiting for confirmation that they understood her brilliant plan. It didn’t take long.

“Are you serious?” Evelyn asked finally.

“It is what you want is it not? To travel the world?” Jo asked Evelyn with a slight smile.

“Yes, but... I always meant to come back. This is my home after all.”

Sensing Evelyn’s dejection, understanding dawned. Belle gave her hand an encouraging squeeze. “It won’t come to that, Evelyn. But you need to be prepared for what might happen if you continue to refuse the Earl.”

Belle gave Jo a pointed stare. It did not matter what Evelyn's dreams were, she was quite possibly already in love with Grey, even if she refused to admit it.

Evelyn heaved a long, wary sigh. "Let us hope it doesn't come to that. That is to say, at least not so soon."

"Evelyn," Jo said gently. "Think of it as your dreams finally coming true. This is what you have always wanted."

Jo was right. But her dreams did not include running away to another continent to live in exile. But what was the alternative? Marry and live in exile? Neither of the aforementioned options held much appeal. What if she chose another option, one where she did not have to marry or be exiled to the continent? What if she could just live her life the way she wanted to?

"Perhaps he won't follow, but even if he does, I've made my decision."

Jo and Belle stared at her expectantly.

"I will not be forced into marriage, but neither will I flee my home."

If this adventure had taught her anything, it was that life's too precious and short to make the wrong decisions.

Both her friends seemed to approve of her decision.

"Then perhaps it is time that I let you in on a little secret of mine," Belle said on a radiant smile, her eyes glittering with mischief. "I am the famed, or should I say infamous Madam De La Frey, and I will design for us such a makeover wardrobe the likes of the ton has yet to see."

Jaws dropped.

Belle beamed at their obvious surprise.

Jo was the first to recover, "How could you not have told us before?"

Belle shrugged. "It never seemed right to bring it up, I suppose. And if it ever became known it would cause quite the scandal."

Evelyn shut her mouth. That would be an understatement. Madam De La Frey was quite infamous. Only the daring of the daring wore her gowns, none of which were spinsters.

"We would cause quite the scandal even wearing gowns of that sort!" Jo exclaimed. "My brother would thrash my behind!"

"I think it's a marvelous idea, Belle!" Evelyn remarked, excitement causing her heart to flutter.

"What?" Jo asked shocked.

"All is fair in love and war," Evelyn replied with a grave nod. "And this is war."

"You are both mad!"

"We might be mad, but are you with us?" Belle asked Jo pointedly.

"Well, I cannot very well let you go through a scandalous

transformation all on your own now can I?"

"Oh good!" Belle chimed happily.

"Just imagine when your brother catches a glimpse you Jo!"

"You won't be laughing when that happens," Jo replied drolly.

Belle turned thoughtful. "I have a few gowns that will be ready in a day. It will give me time to design more."

"When do you suppose Grey will arrive in London?" Jo asked.

"I have no clue," she murmured. But her guess would be any day now.

"I believe Grey will fall over from shock, seeing you in a gown and not in those dreadful breeches," Belle teased.

"I'm more concerned for our brothers," Jo said dryly.

"I doubt Simon would even notice."

"Oh he'll notice. He is after all a man," Belle said.

Evelyn smiled. "Don't forget that I am not the only one going through this change. I daresay everyone will be abuzz over our transformation."

"Not to mention scandalized," Belle chirped.

"Scandalized is good. It is the suspicion I'm worried about," Jo commented dryly.

"What suspicion?" Evelyn asked curiously.

"We all disappear from London only to return transformed. If that doesn't cause suspicion, I don't know what will."

Belle gave Jo a droll stare. "While everyone will notice the difference I dare say no one will be able to put a finger to it. We are after all, surprisingly successful in our pursuit to appear invisible."

Evelyn nodded in agreement. The entire ton believed them to be spinsters, therefore uninteresting and unnoticeable.

"Oh how the lowly will rise," Jo joked lightly.

"Oh how the mighty will fall," Belle countered.

"Oh how our forces will unite," Evelyn finished.

Chapter 9

There was something to be said of potted plants. They were nice to look at for one, and they brought a warm, somewhat personal touch to an otherwise impersonal room, not to mention perfect to hide behind if one was so inclined, which Evelyn happened to be. How she ever thought it would be a marvelous idea to wear one of Madam De La Frey's revealing gowns, would be anyone's guess. It was impossible to hide.

The person daring enough to wear such a revealing gown of midnight blue commanded the attention from everyone. It hardly fit the picture of someone hiding behind a potted plant. And why was she hiding in the first place? Certainly not because she'd behaved like a hoyden on her journey to Bath, or that she had gifted her innocence to a man she barely knew—and who she was quite certain was in love with another woman. Oh no, the potted plant had the pleasure of her company simply because Matthew would be in attendance tonight.

His name was whispered on the lips of every mamma, widow and marriage minded young miss. Even Lady Chesterton almost fainted from pleasure that he had chosen her event at which to reenter society. And while his name was on the lips of every lady, their names were on lips of every gentleman. When she first entered the ballroom with her friends at her side there had only been mild interest in their transformation. Then, without warning, they were swarmed by the attentions of the gentlemen. By all accounts their transformation meant they were ripe for the picking, and not the marriage sort of picking!

Spying Jo and Belle on the far side of the ballroom Evelyn signaled them over. They had become separated after they were all whisked away to the dance floor. To her utter shock it had been Lord Harry

who had swept her away, and she had given him the tongue lashing he so richly deserved.

The sudden image of the back of Matthew's head caused Evelyn to stiffen and her heart to skip a beat. She heaved a sigh of relief when the man turned and she saw it was only Lord Beaverstoke. Matthew's cold furious eyes still haunted her, largely at night. There were even times it felt as though the memory of the coldness of his gaze scorched her skin and then some mornings she would wake up in a sweat, panting from an exotic dream where he had done all sorts of wicked things to her.

But Evelyn needed time to explore her options and decide which road led down to happily ever after, if that even existed.

Much like love.

Such an ordinary word, yet nothing about it could be said to be ordinary. She recalled her mother explaining that love was not measured in how much you felt for a person, or even how much you could forgive him for. It was measured by the determination of the soul. It had sounded silly to her ears at the time, because, how could love ever be measured? Is love not supposed to be immeasurable?

"Evelyn!"

Her thoughts were interrupted by her friends.

"We have been looking for you everywhere," Jo exclaimed when they reach her, excitement evident on their flushed faces.

"Oh? I have been here at my usual spot... next to the fern," Evelyn replied dryly.

She glanced passed them, noticing at once some sort of commotion in the center of the room. Unfortunately, her height did not allow her to catch a glimpse of what or who had all the young ladies whispering and giggling behind their fans.

"Yes we noticed," Belle said giving her a pointed stare. "Why aren't you enjoying the attention?"

Evelyn raised her brows. "I take—"

"Not now!" Jo interrupted grabbing Evelyn's arm. "Come, let us go to the powder room."

Evelyn frowned. The powder room? In all the years of their friendship, they have never once gathered in the powder room. They may as well be on their way to becoming old crones, but never that. Hiding behind potted plants and lurking in the shadows was more their style.

"It's too late now," Belle drawled in a dramatic fashion, bringing their attention to the crowd that now parted for a man and a woman. And Evelyn just knew.

Damn her for being so dimwitted! She ducked behind the plant before he could spy her, motioning for her friends to pretend she

wasn't there. He was searching for her. She was certain of it.

"If you wanted to hide Evelyn, you should have gone with the green!" Belle whispered through her teeth.

"Or gold," Jo muttered.

While the whispers of his attendance had reached her ears earlier, she still couldn't quite believe that he had ventured back into society. He'd been out of the ton for many years and if she were to believe the rumors, he'd publically announced that he would never return. Bad news for her, because it meant that if he signaled her out, scandal would follow right at his heels.

"Evelyn? I think they saw—"

"Shhhhhhhh, and don't look at me," Evelyn whispered furiously at Jo.

"Too late," Belle chirped.

Jo shifted to the side, giving Evelyn a view of the Earl and their hostess.

"They are coming this way," Jo whispered out of the corner of her mouth.

"What?" Evelyn screeched.

"Don't worry. I'm sure when he notices you hiding behind a plant he'll take your meaning and leave," Belle said mockingly.

"He looks pretty determined to me," Jo offered.

"Who looks pretty determined?" A strong male voice interrupted their conversation.

Evelyn closed her eyes at the familiar sound of Matthew's voice, and for the first time it dawned on her what an aching painful hand fate had dealt them. There would be no camel rides in Africa, exotic dishes on exotic islands, no exploring the great pyramids of Egypt or the ruins of Greece if she succumbed to the temptation Matthew presented. He possessed the power to shatter every hope and desire she'd ever had of exploring the world.

"I say. What are you about girl?" The booming voice of Lady Chesterton startled them all out of their wits. The woman had a voice that could part oceans.

"I— Ah—" Evelyn started but stopped when she noticed everyone staring at her as though she'd sprouted a second head. All except Matthew. He stared at her in amusement, his eyes taking in the scandalous gown that clung to her body seductively, before they met hers again in a heated gaze.

Her face flushed the color of a fiery sunset.

Attempting to find her scattered wits she shifted her gaze to Lady Chesterton and found her voice, "Lady Chesterton, I do apologize. I seem to be feeling quite under the weather."

Jo frowned. "Has your headache returned?" she asked in utter

concern. Bless her soul.

Evelyn nodded slowly. "Yes. I'm afraid that it has."

"What a pity girl," Lady Chesterton boomed almost happy, yet her gaze still regarded them narrowly. "The Earl of Grey has requested the pleasure of your acquaintance," she finished as though that fact alone should make her headache disappear.

"Is that so?" Evelyn murmured and awarded him with a level stare, overjoyed that a hint of surprise sounded in her voice.

Lady Chesterton made the necessary introduction that would allow him to seek her out should he wish to do so. Evelyn, on the other hand, barely registered the introductions. She stood numb as she came to realize what game he played. He would not press his suit with her brother, nor would he deign to kidnap her. No, what he planned was much worse. He intended to wear her out and tear down every defense she had.

Publicly.

The horror of her realization paralyzed her.

Evelyn couldn't breathe.

"If you will please excuse me, I feel a bit—" Evelyn clutched her stomach, "faint."

"Good lord girl, you look positively green," Lady Chesterton's voice thundered.

Matthew frowned. Concern entered his ancient eyes.

"Allow me to escort you home, Lady Evelyn," Matthew interrupted, not at all concerned for proprieties.

Evelyn's eyes widened as they met his. Surely he did not believe she would actually accept his offer?

She was saved by Lady Chesterton, who made a disapproving sound.

"That would not be at all proper, as you well know," Lady Chesterton admonished with a frown.

Matthew's countenance turned hard as steel as he shifted his gaze to their hostess.

"I have been a friend of the Tremaine family since childhood, madam. There was no reason to introduce us except formalities. Isn't that right Evelyn?"

Evelyn looked between him and Lady Chesterton. It suddenly occurred to her just how much he would push the boundaries of society to get what he wanted. And he would get away with it.

Lady Chesterton lifted an enquiring brow in Evelyn's direction.

"Er, yes. He is a friend of the family."

Oh but she hated the beaming look of triumph on his face.

"Well!" Jo put in brightly. "The evening has been such a crush and has worn me out so! I will escort Lady Evelyn home."

Not once did Matthew's gaze leave her as they made their apologies

and took their leave. But she felt his eyes scorch her long after she lay in bed that night. The intense burning sensation haunted her dreams until morning.

Matthew watched Lady Josephine and his future wife disappear into the crowd. In the two days it took him to put his affairs in order, he'd had plenty of time to plan his strategy. He would woo Evelyn into submission, and he would be relentless about it. Admittedly, he'd made such a mess of things, that at first he did not know how he would repair the damage. He not only regretted the way he'd handled Evelyn, he regretted the things he'd said. It had been hard to admit, but he had been wrong.

He should never have let his past interfere with his future and he should never have let Evelyn out of his sight. Look where it had gotten him.

So one broken vow later, he'd returned to London, and he would do so again, for her.

Damn, but when he saw her in that gown of midnight blue hue his heart had nearly stopped beating. The neckline had been cut so low it only served to deepen the swell of her breasts. Pools of silk gathered at her feet, hinting at what lies beneath. He'd had to force every muscle in his body to relax and not drag her out of room where every single male ogled her. And they did ogle her. It drove him mad.

Six years he'd spent living in hatred, with no hope that somewhere in this debauched world, there would be someone warm and radiant that could crack the ice around his heart. But by a stroke of luck—or fate—he'd found Evelyn.

Even now as he stood in silent contemplation, Evelyn gone from his view, he had to stop his legs from running after her and beg her to give him a chance. He probably would have made an utter fool of himself if he hadn't seen how much his presence affected her.

He would never be satisfied with just one passionate night. Not when he wanted forever. All he needed to do was convince the reluctant lady that he would make forever worth her while, whether he deserved her, or not.

"I know ladies who are intimate with lords that are acquainted with very bad people." A soft voice whispered beside him.

Matthew glanced over to Lady Belle, who stood staring at him with such an ominous look on her face he almost laughed.

"Is that a threat, my lady?"

"A threat?" She gave a throaty laugh. "Threats are so indelicate, are they not? Think of it more as a fact."

And with that she glided past him, leaving him speechless. Damn him if that little vixen didn't sound serious as hell.

The next evening found them in Lady Westmont's ballroom glowering at each other. Evelyn all but jumped for joy at how perfect it had turned out. Perfect being that if a rich secluded Earl singled out a self-proclaimed spinster, particularly one that had gone through a splendid transformation, every man, gentlemen and rake alike takes notice. The result being that for the first time in her life, her dance card was full.

Oh she'd had gentlemen ask her to partner them in the past but she'd always declined with some feeble excuse or another. Eventually the gentlemen stopped asking. The Earl's attention at Lady Chesterton's however, made her the talk of the town and one of the most sought out ladies in attendance, which in return gave her the perfect opportunity to avoid him. Thus started the glowering, and he'd been glowering all evening.

At this very moment he glared daggers at an oblivious Lord Wesley, a very dear friend of Evelyn's. Matthew, however, did not know this and it appeared that the rumor of last season had reached his ears. A laugh escaped her at the absurd thought of her being secretly engaged to Wes.

"I sincerely hope you are not laughing at me," Wesley drawled just as he whirled them out of the way of poor Lady Rose and Lord Spencer.

Evelyn's cheeks flared. "Apologies Wes, I was lost in thought."

"Would those thoughts perhaps be about a certain Earl?" he asked innocently.

Her eyes narrowed on his expression. So Wesley had not been as ignorant as he would have her believe.

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Oh I don't know. He's been staring daggers at my back for the better part of the evening and you have been stealing glances at him since he arrived. That and I overheard Belle and Josephine place a wager on your wedding date."

At her shocked expression he gave a throaty laugh before he explained, "Belle wagered you will be married before the Season's end, given your history with the Earl, but Jo didn't have that much faith in the Earl's ability to persuade you into matrimony."

Pulling her slightly closer than was proper as the dance ended, he murmured into her ear, "You should have eloped with me when you had the chance, my dear."

Evelyn burst out laughing. She should have known Belle wouldn't keep her mouth shut.

"You considered eloping with him?"

The soft whisper laced with menace sounding behind them caused

tiny vibrations to pierce Evelyn's skin. She turned to face the Earl of Grey, whose eyes glittered with murderous intent and let out of soft sigh.

"Well, that depends on who you ask, I suppose," she murmured, in no mood to explain gossip of the past.

Besides, he had already proven he did not handle male friendships well.

"The subject came up on an occasion or two, but so far the lady has resisted my charms," Wes drawled with a friendly smile, amused by the obvious display of temper.

Evelyn wanted to clobber him for his wicked sense of humor.

"The idea was rejected immediately," Evelyn huffed.

Wes snorted. "I wouldn't know since I was never part of that conversation, but then, the night is still young," he gave Evelyn a pointed glance and chuckled when she gasped at the implication.

She would not run away with him to get away from the Earl!

He turned to Grey with a smile. "Grey," he murmured with a nod before disappearing into the crowd.

Matthew seethed. Never had he experienced such jealous rage. Not even the night he'd found Charlotte in bed with his best friend.

"... fine evening tonight. Do you not agree, my lord?"

Evelyn's words penetrated his burning rage and he frowned at her a light attempt at conversation. Here he battled his inner demons and she wanted to talk about the weather? Well, that was too bad.

"Do you find me so repulsive that you would rather elope with a fop than consider marrying me?"

A scowl replaced her thoughtful expression. "Wes is not a fop, and they were only rumors. I did not even know you at the time," she replied indignantly.

"Wes?" he asked, his eyes narrowing to slits. "It seems to me you are on a first name basis with every man in London."

"It would seem so, *my lord*. But to answer your question, I do not find you repulsive, but I would rather marry that fop than spend the rest of my life exiled in the country with only you as my companion."

Her words gave him pause, and some of the stiffness eased from his body. So St. Aldwyn had been behind her departure from Bath after all, by tattling his intention to keep her at his estate. Damnation.

"Is that the only objection you have for not wanting to become my wife? You believe you would be exiled?"

"I do not believe anything. I know. But no, that is not the only reason," Evelyn said, sensing a trap in his question but uncertain precisely what.

"Then by all means, enlighten me."

Evelyn shifted on her feet before she replied, "Regardless of my

reasons for refusing your offer, I will not be the pawn in your feud with the Marquis.”

“What the devil are you talking about?”

Evelyn crossed her arms. “You made it perfectly clear that your past was no business of mine and if your reaction and behavior is any indication, the only reason you’re determined I marry you is to get revenge on the friend who betrayed you six years ago.”

So this was the reason for her rejection. She thought he wanted to get back at St. Aldwyn. He supposed he could understand that. She didn’t know that somehow, in their short acquaintance she had broken through the walls of his defenses and slipped into his battered heart.

He scowled. “May I remind you I found you not once, but twice in that man’s arms?”

“We are just friends,” Evelyn murmured, her expression softening.

He took her hand in his. “You are not a pawn and I do not have some diabolical plan up my sleeve. Please give me a chance to prove that to you.”

Evelyn snatched her hand back, not believing him even though she saw nothing but truth in his eyes. Actions spoke louder than words. Besides, if what he said was true, it would only be countless times harder to fight his pursuit.

Smoothing her hands over her dress she prepared herself for an outburst.

“Even if you do prove to be sincere, I’m afraid I won’t change my mind on the matter, my lord.”

“Matthew,” he snapped, glaring at her. “I will not back off, Evelyn.”

She took a step back. “I have made my decision.”

“Is it not fair that you give me a chance to change your mind?”

Evelyn looked into those vivid green eyes, sincerity shining through them. She should say no, but that only seemed to make him more determined, so she gave a small nod.

The grin he gave her gave made her heart jump, but it was quickly replaced by a thundering mask by the next words blurted out of her mouth, “But that doesn’t mean you will be the only gentlemen vying for my hand.”

“Only moments ago you said you have made your decision,” he spat out.

He was right. But she wanted him to understand that he was not her only choice and he could not bully her into marriage. That and she wanted to ruffle his feathers.

“I will not go out of my way to gain the attention of some lord. But if you are given a chance, all will be given a chance.”

She held up her hand when he would have interrupted.

“After all,” she continued, “just because I’m marginally open to the

prospect of marriage, doesn't mean you should be my only choice."

Matthew wanted to protest, but sensed it would only add to this ridiculous notion. He'd be damned if he let her take another man! If she thought he would let some fop sniff around her skirts, she could think again. He would just have to ensure that there was no doubt in anyone's mind that she belonged to him.

"Fine," he bit out. "But you waltz with no one except me."

"No," she said, standing fast. She wasn't about to let him dictate her life.

Her gaze suddenly darted beyond him, her eyes widening in delight.

Turning to see what had caught her attention he silently cursed under his breath. Her brother and his lapdog—St. Aldwyn—approached them. Westfield wore a huge grin on his face while the lapdog had his usual look of boredom about him.

"Simon!" Evelyn exclaimed happily as she rushed passed him to greet her brother.

Westfield laughed as he enfolded his sister in his embrace. "It would seem I have been neglecting my brotherly duties of late, not being here to escort you to events."

He glanced over to Matthew. "Grey," he nodded with a smile. "Glad to see you have finally crawled out of your cave."

Matthew, whose irritation emerged with that comment, muttered under his breath. "Westfield."

He ignored St. Aldwyn.

"I see you've become acquainted with my sister," Westfield continued happily. "I must warn you, she is the most pertinacious woman that ever lived."

"Simon!" Evelyn said, heat flooding her cheeks.

Simon winked at her. "It is a confirmed fact, sis. There is no hope for you." He put his hand dramatically over his heart.

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Oh please."

"I daresay it's a trait we both share," Matthew drawled. The challenge is his gaze unmistakable.

Damien, who had been quiet the whole time, turned to Grey. "So what has you 'crawling out of your cave' as Westfield so aptly put it?"

Matthew tensed. Though the question was innocent enough, he heard the true meaning behind it. His jaw hardened. "Business," he bit out.

"Good, good," Westfield said cheerfully.

"What kind of business?" Damien pressed, looking deceptively curious.

"The kind of business you shrink away from," Matthew drawled.

Evelyn winced and her brother, who appeared unfazed by the tension that gripped the air, asked, "Oh? What kind might that be?"

“Marriage.”

Evelyn groaned when Simon stared at Matthew a heartbeat before his gaze flickered to her in question.

“Am I to assume that the two of you have formed an attachment?”

“No!” Evelyn cried out. “You are not to assume anything of the sort!”

Simon ignored her and looked to Matthew, lifting an inquisitive brow.

“Perhaps I should call on you in the morning?” Matthew asked her brother.

“What! Why?” Evelyn winced at the desperate note in her voice.

“Good, good,” her brother said, ignoring her. “I shall expect you after breakfast.”

Matthew nodded before turning to take her hand, but thought better of it when she glared at him, fire in those violet eyes.

Ah yes. They were both stubborn as hell.

“Until tomorrow, Lady Evelyn,” he said in a low, deliberate voice.

Evelyn could only stare in horror as he took his leave from them, making his way through the crowd toward the double doors, as though he had not just ruined her life.

“Evelyn?” her brother asked somewhat incredulous, looking at her with loaded questions in his eyes.

What was there to say? The Earl had made his intentions clear. She frowned when Damien winked at her. Why did he keep her secret? What was he waiting for, world war?

“Well, I daresay he plans to ask for permission to court you. Isn’t that grand?”

Evelyn scowled at her brother. Isn’t that just grand? Has he lost his marbles? The last thing she wanted was Simon encouraging this madness.

“You can’t seriously think to give him permission to court me!”

“Why not?” he asked, confused.

“Has it not occurred to you that I don’t want him to court me? That I do not want to marry him?” she whispered furiously.

“No one said anything about marriage my dear,” Damien put in, giving her brother an imploring look.

“Of course not!” Her brother agreed. “You don’t have to marry if you do not wish to. But I’m not turning him down just because you prefer to spend your days drawing treasure maps.”

When she stiffened he continued gently, “Look sis, I want you to be happy and all I’m asking is for you to try. You might be surprised at how things turn out.”

Evelyn searched her brother’s eyes. He seemed sincere that he would not force marriage on her. But like any other man, he was of

the opinion that women could never be happy without a husband and although she had plenty to say about that, she knew his actions were motivated by love.

“Fine, I shall be open-minded about courtship, if it even is a courtship he wants.”

With those uttered words Evelyn suspected she had just given immeasurable power to the men in her life, thus ending life as she knew it. Her fate felt sealed. But sealed or not, she would not go down without a fight. She only hoped she could hold out long enough to be certain that when it came time to make the final decision, she would make the right one.

“That is all I ask,” Simon said with a huge grin.

Chapter 10

There had always been some sort of satisfaction for Evelyn in rising early. While the ton preferred to stay in bed until noon, Evelyn enjoyed spending the mornings in the garden, whether soaking up a bit of morning sun or sitting in the shade reading a book. Sometimes, she would rise just before dawn to watch the first rays of sunlight stab into the darkness, barefoot traipsing on the wet surface to feel the grass between her toes.

Those days however were rare, since she was greeted almost always with grey clouds and murky skies, but it made them all the more special. There was something very magical in how the light chased away the darkness, but not this day, Evelyn reflected as she made her way down the stairs. While it was still early, she found no joy in this morning. Her sleep had been plagued by nightmares of the previous evening and not to mention haunted by images of a certain Earl.

Those blasted dreams were the last of her worries. He had shocked the whole ton in his pursuit of her, which wouldn't have been so shocking if he hadn't made it clear she was the only reason he endured the season. No one believed they had first met at Lady Chesterton's ball, and heated looks notwithstanding, his gaze tracked her every move. Rumors were already starting.

Then there was the notorious troublemaker Damien, who still hadn't said a word of her indiscretion to her brother. And yes, while he had given his word that he would keep her secret; she couldn't bring herself to trust him entirely. Was there not a code of honor amongst men? Her brother wasn't a simpleton. He would eventually put two and two together without anyone needing to inform him. Unless... No. The thought was too ridiculous to even consider and her mind would be better spent on what to do about Matthew.

If only this attraction between her and the Earl would go away. But every time he came near her, tiny prickles of awareness would race across her skin causing her to shiver. Then, when he spoke, the rough timber of his voice would flow through her veins, causing her body to go into a hypnotic state. She would imagine their bodies entwined together, leaving her with longing to be enfolded in his arms. It was becoming embarrassing, the way she lost control over her body and mind.

Luckily for her, time would cure this affliction. In the meantime she needed a distraction. Unfortunately nothing was more distracting than him stalking her every move. So, if no distractions could be found, Evelyn would simply have to create one, and she excelled at creating distractions. Her brother called it mischief, but they would have to agree to disagree.

Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs Evelyn's mouth dropped open, unprepared for the sight that greeted her eyes. What in the good Lord's name?

Their front hall had been filled with flowers, hundreds and hundreds of flowers. Lilies, roses, hyacinths, daisies, orchids and other plants she did not recognize and...Good heavens, was that a tree? Evelyn blinked, and then lowered her lashes. This must be a dream. But when her eyes opened again the flowers had not magically disappeared.

She stood on the bottom step and marveled at the different colors that sprang forth from every flower, every plant. The tree's considerable size would have made it a difficult feat to transport, yet its impact gave great aesthetic pleasure. So arresting was the sight before her that it was as though she had stepped out from her own world and into another.

Evelyn inhaled deeply, and the smell of earthy sweetness overwhelmed her senses.

"What the devil?"

Evelyn turned just in time to see Simon's mouth fall open as he joined her on the bottom step. She suppressed the smile that threatened to spread across her face. Gaping wasn't a good look on her brother.

"Is that a tree?" She heard him ask, his voice incredulous.

"It would seem so," she murmured, her gaze returning to the lovely sight of colors.

"Bloody hell. Whoever sent all these flowers should be banned from this planet."

Evelyn laughed. "It must have cost a fortune."

Simon gave her a suspicious look. "Do you know who sent them?"

"I have no idea," Evelyn answered, her gaze never straying from the

array of colors.

“Walter!” Simon boomed.

Evelyn grinned. “Curious, aren’t we?”

Simon winked at her. “Who wouldn’t want to know this madman’s identity, especially when he’s sending your beloved sister a fortune’s worth of flowers?”

“Perhaps they are for you.”

“Now that,” Simon said aghast, “would be beyond disturbing.”

Walter appeared so suddenly both Simon and Evelyn jumped.

“Good morning my Lord, Lady Evelyn,” he greeted as he held out a card. It had always been rather eerie how he seemed to know exactly what would be asked of him.

Evelyn suppressed a laugh as she took the card from Walter. He had flower petals sticking out of his impeccably styled hair.

Taking a deep breath she opened the note, hoping it wasn’t from who she suspected.

“There’s no name,” she murmured, mostly for the benefit of her brother. Her eyes widened as she read the words.

“One flower for every sparkle that enters my eyes when I gaze upon your breathtaking beauty.”

Laughter bubbled forth from her. It was the worst attempt at poetry she’d ever come across. Well, at least now she knew for certain Matthew had not sent these flowers. He would never speak such drivel, let alone write it. She was however, intrigued. Who would go to such lengths to capture her attention, yet not leave his name?

Simon snatched the note from her hand and read the verse. Snorting he said, “Still can’t see where that bloody tree fits in.”

“It would seem I have a secret admirer.”

He handed her back the note.

“It’s those damn dresses you’ve been wearing.”

Evelyn rewarded him with a huge grin, ridiculously pleased at his grumbling tone. She supposed she shouldn’t be surprised she had drawn the attention of some gentlemen.

“Do you want me to get rid of it?” he asked, waving his hands at the hall containing all the flowers.

“Do not even dare! We can arrange them throughout the house, I think. It would be a shame to waste so many beautiful flowers.”

Simon only grunted his response.

Walter had already shouted the orders.

“Just get rid of that damn tree.”

Evelyn frowned at his sudden foul mood as she followed him to the breakfast room. Whatever was the matter with him? One moment he

smiled the next he'd turned surly. She settled down across from him and regarded him thoughtfully.

"What has your briefs in a twist, brother?"

He gave her a droll stare. "It's not ladylike to refer to the undergarments of a man, Evelyn."

"Very well, I shan't refer to you undergarments. Does it perhaps have to do with a young widow you fancy?"

"Evelyn!"

She lifted her hands in defeat. "I'm merely enquiring after you mood."

Walter appeared at the door.

"The Earl of Grey for his lordship."

Evelyn's blood turned to ice at Walter's announcement. He was early.

Simon gave her a pointed stare before he stood. She heard the scrape of his chair against the marble floor, heard his footsteps padding toward the door and disappearing into the hall, but still she could only stare at the empty space her brother had just occupied.

An uneasy feeling began to work up to the center of her heart. She felt like a caged animal, cornered with no hope of escape. Would he inform Simon of her indiscretion? But even as she thought the question she already knew the answer. He said as much last evening. He was declaring his intentions and might even demand her hand in marriage in light of her ruination.

Gathering her scattered wits Evelyn centered her thoughts on the light that always chased away the darkness.

With deliberate movements she stood. He thought he had everything under control. Let him play his little game. She would not bet on the outcome.

"Let me get this straight," Westfield said with barely veiled amusement. "You expect me to believe that my sweet, loving sister, Evelyn, not only stole your horse, but stole it clad a shirt that belonged to you, which she also stole after waking up in your bed, having passed out after over imbibing in wine?"

"Yes."

Westfield sat back in his chair and regarded Grey from across his desk speculatively before he continued, "Then you gave chase, found her lying muddled and unconscious in the road after which you escorted her back to the Inn, on foot no less, and where she in return ran away from you, after you so thoughtfully helped her."

"Yes," Matthew ground out.

"You found her in Bristol dressed as a boy, learning upon your arrival she stayed in a men's establishment. You then took it upon

yourself to escort her back to your own lodgings in Bath where you proceeded to compromise her, after which, she ran away yet again.”

“Yes.”

“You found her at our Aunt’s residence in the arms of St. Aldwyn, and confronted him, which eventually led to the two of you brawling in the breakfast room.”

“Yes.”

Westfield let out an incredulous breath. “You then bribed my Aunt’s servants into spying on Evelyn and returned later that day only to discover that she had run away. Again.”

“Yes,” Matthew bit out in frustration. “It sounds ridiculous when you put it like that,” he grumbled.

“You must forgive me, while your story is quite intriguing, it does border on the ridiculous. My sister gets into trouble yes, but never like this, though she does seem different somehow.”

That caught Matthew’s attention. “Different?” he asked curiously.

Westfield regarded him in silent contemplation before he answered, “Evelyn has become... how to put it... more daring and bold. Not to mention the transformation of wardrobe. Yet there is also a sense of sadness that surrounds her. I haven’t been able to put a name to it yet.”

“You haven’t questioned her about this sudden change?”

“Good lord no!” Westfield exclaimed with a hint of a smile. “I am too relieved she’s finally climbed out of the shell she’s been hiding in and is partaking in the real world.”

“Am I to presume then, you have no aversion to my courting Evelyn?”

“I do not,” Westfield said cautiously. “But regardless of her actions, which I have yet to hear her side of, I will not force the situation on her. Whether she accepts you or not, it will be her choice, not mine.”

Matthew grunted. He had hoped Westfield would force the issue, but knew that while this family stayed within the norms of society and its rules, they weren’t slaves to it. Yet a voice at the far back of his mind, one he had no intention of acting upon, whispered tales of doubt. Why did Westfield not rage for his sister’s loss of innocence?

Matthew stood. “I trust this conversation will stay between us,” he asked politely, even though it was in no way framed as a question.

“Of course,” Westfield nodded, rising as well. “But understand that if I keep this conversation between us, I cannot hear my sister’s side and will I only be left with your story.”

Matthew understood. He could live with that.

“But the next time you feel the need to send flowers, keep it to a dozen or so, and don’t include a damn tree.”

Matthew stilled, his face darkening into a scowl.

"I didn't send flowers, nor did I see a tree."

Westfield gawked at him. "Saints man, you couldn't have missed a bloody tree in my front hall."

Matthew's scowl deepened. There had been a tree in the front hall? Now that he thought about it, it wasn't impossible. He would have thought nothing of it had he seen it. Considering what he knew of Westfield, it was rather telling, to not even notice a tree in the front hall. The flowers on the other hand must have been cleared seeing as he would have noticed those, and only because it meant some poor bastard had no sense of self-preservation.

"Hell Grey, the fact that you didn't notice a tree—"

Matthew interrupted with a snort, and then said, "Says more about you Westfield than it does about me."

Simon chuckled. "Debatable, my friend."

"Do you know who sent the flowers?" Matthew asked. Irritation made his voice sound clipped.

Westfield shook his head. "Unsigned note, I'm afraid. Who the hell would send a bloody tree?"

"A note?"

"Some rot about sparkling eyes."

Matthews cursed. Of course it hadn't been signed. No man would be fool enough to court Evelyn openly after he publically staked his claim. This fool better get out of his way before Matthew destroyed him.

By the time Matthew reached his town house two hours later, his temper hung by a thread. According to the servants Evelyn had disappeared during his meeting with her brother without in-forming them of her whereabouts. Only after Westfield mentioned the flowers and that damn tree, did he see those blasted flowers everywhere he looked. He also learned (after bribing a maid) that Evelyn had laughed after she read the note and ordered the flowers to be arranged throughout the house.

A foul curse escaped his lips.

She knew he hadn't sent those flowers. He suspected the hounds would come sniffing, but he never expected this, not after he concluded no man would be fool enough to dare pursue his woman.

This fool had been smart enough to stay anonymous, so perhaps he needed closer consideration. The fool also possessed an opulence of wealth. What man wasted a fortune on flowers? It was unheard of. But this fool knew Evelyn very well, and gifted her with a garden.

She loved gardens, another bit of knowledge he got from her maid, and apparently knowledge only a few possessed, namely close friends and family. St. Aldwyn would be one of them. It was all Matthew

could do not to march over to the bastard and take his limbs apart.

"Wilson!" he bellowed.

Wilson appeared seemingly out of nowhere. "You called, sir?"

Without looking his way Matthew ordered, "Cancel my plans for the rest of the week."

"But my lord, you have—" his butler trailed off as he gave him a murderous glare. "Very well sir," he squeaked and disappeared.

Damnation. Now he scared his servants. A shaky hand raked through his hair. He needed to calm these raging emotions. They were starting to overwhelm him. Never in his life had he felt this way about a woman and he would be damned if he let another man take her from him! She was aware of his intentions. He could not have made them any clearer. His return to society, his relentless pursuit and his declaration to her brother, yet still she acted as though he played some game. This was not a game. She had gifted him with her innocence and captured something inside of him he could not put a name to. And yes, they have known each other only a short while, but it felt as though their souls have spent lifetimes together.

Matthew sank down into the chair behind the desk with a sigh. What had Evelyn done to him? Waxing drivel of souls and lifetimes? He was beginning to think he'd lost his mind. How else to explain his fascination with her? Her laughter carried whimsical magic that never failed to envelope him and keep him spellbound while her eyes, those beautiful mischiefs eyes, set his loins on fire. He loved the way she tasted, the way she responded to him even when she didn't give him an inch.

It dawned on him, in light of this new found madness, that to win her he would need to withdraw. Evelyn needed time to come to terms with her fate. She fought the future that had been decided the moment she gave up her innocence. But she would never stop resisting if he kept pushing her to accept him. Stubborn chit.

Ha! She would probably invent some ridiculous notion to explain his withdrawal in hopes he'd given up. He would never give up. She would come to see that soon enough. He thought back to the morning he'd found her in St. Aldwyn's arms. The thought of her in another man's arms was unbearable, the sight of it devastating. He hadn't understood how she invoked such powerful emotions within him, until now. Madness. It had overtaken him the moment she stumbled, pickled into his room.

His meeting with Westfield had opened a flood gate of other emotions as well. Regret of friendships lost, loneliness of being isolated for so long and guilt over past behaviors. He wanted to explain, but what? What words healed gaping wounds of the past. Certainly not words he possessed. He'd burned those bridges a long

time ago. Evelyn was light, and he would not let anyone take away his light.

He stood in the corner of the ballroom, shadowed by a huge sculpture, a mysterious figure that watched as Lady Evelyn laughed at something Lady Josephine said. He wished he'd seen her face when she'd found the garden he'd sent her. She so loved spending early mornings in the garden.

A slow smile spread across his face as he thought of the Earl's reaction. The man had thundered out of the house like he'd been possessed by the devil himself.

Lady Evelyn and Lady Josephine slowly made their way closer to where he stood, shadowed, oblivious to his observations.

"I say Evelyn, have you heard of Grey's sudden departure, presumably to attend to an urgent matter at his estate?"

He saw Lady Evelyn go still. How interesting, the Earl of Grey had left London.

"He said nothing to me, no. Not that I mind, of course. He can do as he pleases."

Was that disappointment he saw in her eyes?

Lady Josephine shrugged, "You have been avoiding him."

"Who has been avoiding who?" Lady Belle joined the conversation.

"We are talking about Grey and his sudden departure."

"Oh how boring!" Lady Belle said. "I already know, the entire world knows!"

Lady Josephine frowned. "It just seems odd he would leave now that you have a secret admirer, Evelyn."

The mysterious man in the shadow's straightened.

"You should have seen it Jo, it was like something from a magical world. I've never seen anything like it before."

"Why would he leave the note unsigned, it must have cost a fortune," Lady Belle remarked.

The lady was correct, it had cost a fortune.

"There are only a handful of men that rich who could afford to waste a fortune on flowers."

Lady Josephine was smart, but his fortune wasn't well known.

They all nodded at her remark. The mysterious figure chuckled under his breath. They would never solve this puzzle.

"We can make a list and check off each gentleman one by one," Lady Belle suggested.

Lady Evelyn shook her head. "I don't care to know his identity yet, let's first see if he sends anything else."

They all agreed before they started to move away from the sculpture.

“Oh I almost forgot! I have just heard the most disturbing rumor,” Lady Belle said.

“What?” Lady Josephine and Lady Evelyn said in simultaneously.

“Lord Spencer has taken up with the widow whats-her-name, and it is rumored that she is quite scandalous...”

Their voices trailed off and he could no longer hear what they were saying. The figure emerged from behind the sculpture. So Grey had taken off to the country had he? He would give the man credit; it had been a calculated move on his part, one that may or may not pay off. He'd seen the disappointment in Lady Evelyn's eyes when she'd heard of his departure, but no devastation. No matter, he still had some tricks up his sleeve.

Chapter 11

Seated on a bench in the garden Evelyn read a chapter of *Lady Sugar Finds Love*. Or at least she tried to. Her thoughts kept drifting to Matthew. A week had passed since Evelyn had last seen or heard from him. A week of tortured dreams with shockingly passionate embraces. Today, she had awakened early after yet another restless night plagued with dreams of Matthew.

But this dream had been different. She had awakened alone in his bed, cold and confused. Then laughter reached her ears. Evelyn had followed the laughter to the garden where she saw Matthew in a passionate embrace with a faceless Charlotte.

The dream however was nothing compared to what her imagination conjured up at his continued absence. Every morning after breakfast she would wander through the garden with no particular direction. Even Simon was beginning to give her curious glances. The previous evening they left the assembly early because she claimed a headache. It was as though with him, he had taken her purpose, which was ridiculous really. The fact that she felt she now had no one to spar with, no one to avoid, and no one to obsess over was utter rubbish.

So Evelyn decided that she needed to focus on something other than his continued absence. Last week she thought to create a distraction, then Matthew left, and it had been unnecessary. Now it seemed more necessary than ever. Perhaps she would work on identifying her mystery admirer. At least he had not abandoned her.

Every day she received gifts. Nothing as extravagant as the flowers and tree, but nothing proper either. In fact, every gift had been rather improper. Perhaps the clue to his identity lay in the gifts and its meaning for her.

Absently Evelyn turned a page of the chapter. Two books had been

left on the front porch, carefully bound. One was the type of book that turned Evelyn's face red whenever she thought of it, the other a book detailed Colin Bradshaw's exploration around the world, quite brilliant actually. The Ming vase presented some confusion however. Why would her mystery man send her such a priceless gift? The other gifts included a pocket watch, compass and a case of brandy. They all implied intimate knowledge of her dreams to travel the world.

Just then, the clatter of hooves alerted Evelyn to a visitor. A large carriage stopped not so far away from where she sat. In a hypnotic state she watched as Matthew, looking as handsome as ever gracefully jumped down and looked up at the house. She drank in the sight of him as he hurried up the stairs before she rushed toward the back entrance of the house.

Ten minutes later Evelyn entered the morning room where Matthew awaited her. He stood with his back to her as he gazed out the window. He turned as he heard her enter, the light in his eyes causing her heart pound. He looked like some dark, seductive predator waiting to pounce on his prey. She stopped a few feet away from him, not bothering to take a seat.

"My lord," she greeted, continuing to watch him carefully.

Crossing the distance between them, he stopped inches away from her, his nearness making her whole body turn warm and velvety. She couldn't seem to find a single word to say. He seemed to want to say something too but thought better of it. Instead, he reached for her hands, leaving a small kiss on the inside of each wrist. All Evelyn's senses leaped to life at his touch. The sensation of his warm lips upon her skin made her tremble with longing to be in his arms again, to be swept away by the desire his touch provoked.

He gazed into her eyes.

"I have missed you, Evelyn."

She shivered at the husky timbre of his voice, continuing to stare at him like a dimwitted idiot, but couldn't seem to help herself. She wasn't sure she could breathe, let alone speak.

"Did you miss me even a little?" he asked, lowering his head to her hands once more to leave small kisses on her wrist.

Yes, she had missed him but wasn't about to admit it. She was more than content to stand here and stare at him all day. Unfortunately, that would only encourage him.

"I wasn't aware that you'd left town, my lord."

"Liar."

Something about the way he whispered the accusation caught her attention. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Did you leave with the hope that I would pine after you, my Lord Grey?" she asked, lifting a delicate brow in question.

He stared at her for a moment before cupping her chin in his hand. The intimacy of the gesture made her head spin with desire.

"So you did notice," he murmured with a slight smile.

She shifted away from him. "You did not answer my question," she murmured, determined not to be seduced by the soft timbre of his voice.

"Do you truly believe I am capable of such deviousness?"

She searched his eyes for a hint of truth. Had all this been planned? Had he intentionally left without a word? Of course he did. He couldn't possibly believe her to be so dimwitted.

"You left without a word after begging me to give you a chance."

"Begging?"

She nodded. "Begging."

He gave a short laugh. "Then you do believe me capable of such deceit," he said, a glint entering his eyes.

"Yes."

"Good."

The next moment he took her by the shoulders and pulled her against his chest, his lips pressed against hers hard in a passionate kiss. Her lips parted, not in surprise, but pleasure and he took advantage of that, pulling her even closer to him. She did not attempt to turn her head away or push out from his embrace. Instead, she leaned into him, taking pleasure in what he offered.

Something deep and primal, that'd been lurking within him from the moment she walked into the room, now urged Matthew to press forward, demanding she surrender, and he would have nothing but her full surrender. She knew it, fought it even, but eventually she would come to understand that her fate had always been sealed.

It took a moment for him to realize she was not fighting him. He groaned against her lips in delight. Her arms moved around his neck and she responded with growing passion she usually hid very well. His tongue touched hers and his hand followed the curve of her spine, keeping her close to him.

She leaned into him even more and he in return pressed himself against her, wanting her to feel his desire for her. She caught her breath, making a small sound of surprise while he trailed kisses down the line of her neck. He knew how to make her knees weak, knew every weakness she had for him. Knew she wanted him just as badly as he wanted her. Their bodies fit so well together.

She didn't protest when his hands roamed the length of her body, instead she moaned and held on to his neck for support.

He cupped her buttocks and lifted her to position himself closer to her. She was hot, ready. His fingers tugged at the skirt of her dress, wanting to remove barriers between them—

A knock on the door was the only warning that their privacy was about to be interrupted. They broke apart at once and managed to place a small sofa between them just as a footman brought in tea.

Evelyn released a ragged breath, glancing down at her hands. They were a shaking. What would the servants think of her if it were to become known she behaved like a trollop where the Earl was concerned?

That kiss...

Her lack of control with him, the way she abandoned her resolve, both frustrated and irritated her. Normally she wasn't so out of control. She'd never been one to indulge in scandalous behavior, she only observed it. Yet a moment in his company seemingly robbed her of all common sense. Well, there would simply be no more kissing. She would not make the same mistake again.

You've already made that mistake again... and again, her inner voice reminded her. Fine. She will not make the same mistake anymore.

Matthew was at her side again the second the footman disappeared, clearly intending to finish what he'd started, and she forced her feet to move away, to put distance between them. She noted the footman had left the door slightly ajar. Good man.

Matthew regarded her for a brief second before nodding, a ragged breath escaping his lips.

"This isn't the time or the place."

"Actually," Evelyn started to say slowly, so that there was no mistaking her words, "there will never be a proper time or place, my lord. This has to stop." Even though it was... Delightful. Heavenly. Magical.

"Why?" he asked in a clipped tone, his eyes suddenly hard.

Because I'm only a pawn in your diabolical plan for revenge against the man who betrayed you and can be no future for us.

"Surely you do not need to ask."

"Yes, I do," he countered quietly. "You cannot deny this attraction between us, Evelyn. I won't allow you to. The real question here is what are you going to do about it?"

"There is nothing to do," she pressed quietly in return.

"I believe we are well past nothing, sweetheart."

Evelyn stiffened. "Don't call me that. I gave you a chance to persuade me to change my mind, not to seduce me." She needed no persuading for that.

Matthew smiled at her indignation. "Seducing you has nothing to do with my persuading you to marry me."

"No? Then why are you trying to seduce me?"

"I need to feel of your body against mine."

The simple truth of his statement caused a pinching sensation in her

heart. It would be so easy to fall into his web of seduction. If he continued to make statements like that and look at her with such longing in his gaze, he was going to reduce her to a puddle of mush.

Matthew gave her a knowing smile.

Oh yes she thought numbly, trouble was heading her way.

The next morning it came as no surprise that Evelyn awoke from a peaceful slumber. The big surprise came in the form of her maid, Megan, rushing into her room announcing excitedly that there had been a delivery of delicious treats, ranging from chocolate to marzipan to licorice to countless others.

Evelyn had trouble understanding what Megan was going on about when it dawned that this delivery of treats came from mystery man. By the looks of her maid it was extravagant. The coincidence of the delivery and Matthews's arrival did not escape her notice.

"Come on Megan, help me dress," Evelyn said hastily and Megan bounced up and down in excitement. While her maid helped her dress in a simple morning dress of sky blue, Evelyn considered her mystery man. The flowers and the tree seemed to suggest he knew her favorite place she spent most of her mornings. It wasn't public knowledge, but it wasn't a crown secret either.

The rest of the gifts suggested awareness of her dreams to travel the world, except the case of brandy. That gift alone spoke volumes. Evelyn would sometimes creep into her brother's study and indulge in a glass of brandy. She told no one about it, finding an odd sense of satisfaction to keep that little secret to herself. Regardless of the gifts, it was becoming quite apparent that her mystery man went through a lot of trouble finding unique gifts that only she would understand the meaning of. It was alarmingly intimate.

Rushing down the stairs with Megan short on her heels, her eyes widened at the sight that yet again greeted her in the front parlor. Hundreds of boxes of sweets in all shapes and sizes crowded the front all, almost as colorful as the garden, only this time a garden of delicious treats. She could smell the sweetness radiating from their front parlor. What she did not however expect was Matthew, standing amidst the colorful sweets, his expression thunderous. His gaze darkened when he caught sight of her. Clearly this would not be a pleasant visit.

Walter suddenly appeared before her, blocking out Matthew's wintry glare.

"Good morning, my lady," he said as he handed her the card.

"Good morning Walter," she murmured, sparing a brief glance in Matthew's direction. His eyes were now narrowed on the note in her hands. She ignored his frosty glare and quickly read the card, mentally

willing herself not to react.

I hang onto each word you speak. I look forward to this evening...

To Evelyn's relief her composure never once slipped under his penetrating gaze and she congratulated herself for keeping her calm under those heated eyes. Under no circumstance may he see this note.

"What does it say?" Matthew asked in a clipped voice.

She spared him the slightest of glances and frowned at the sight of his clenched jaw and his fisted hands. He reminded her of a bull about to take charge.

"Not that it is any of your business," Evelyn started annoyed, "but if you must know it's some lame attempt at poetry," she lied.

"Then you won't mind my reading it."

Well, of course she minded.

"There is no reason for you to read my note," she trailed off when she saw the subtle change of his posture. Every instinct in her body screamed she should just hand him the note even if it proved her to be a liar. She shrieked when he gave a step forward and did the only thing she could think of, she turned and ran up the stairs. She barely cleared three steps before he yanked her back against his broad chest, his breathing heavy in her ear. Without a word he snatched the note out of her hand and read the content. And tensed.

Common sense told Evelyn that she was innocent, but previous betrayals would have him lash out.

"It is not what it seems," Evelyn whispered cautiously, recognizing she would need to tread lightly. Those hard green eyes lifted to pierce her soul.

"Then why did you lie to me?" The question came softly, surprising Evelyn. She had expected anger.

"Because you demanded the truth," Evelyn said on a sigh. "And I did not wish to anger you."

Matthew exhaled. "Do you know who he is?"

Evelyn shook her head, glancing at the array of sweets in thought. "No."

"Look at me when you say it."

She shot him a glare. "No."

Matthew nodded, satisfied. On some level he understood her defiance. She was struggling to keep control of her life, refusing to marry and hand him the reins. He needed to show her that she wouldn't be giving up control over her life; she would share it with him.

"Will you be attending the Richmond ball tonight?"

"Yes," she murmured reluctantly.

"Then I shall look forward to seeing you there."

Leaning forward he planted a chaste kiss on her head if only to show her that his anger had not been directed at her.

A breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding escaped her when the door shut behind him. She slumped against the staircase and sighed. What a morning this was turning out to be!

Patience had never been one of his virtues, Matthew reflected as he was shown into St. Aldwyn's study. And after having been made to wait for over half an hour he had lost what little patience he had. The room, he noted, still looked the same as it had six years ago. Nothing changed, not even the man sitting behind the grand mahogany desk. But then, it didn't matter whether St. Aldwyn had changed or not, what mattered was that he had changed.

"Well, this is certainly a surprise," St. Aldwyn drawled. His lazy stance not fooling Matthew one bit.

"I'm not here on a social call."

"Never would have thought it, old friend."

"I'm not your friend," Matthew growled, noting with smug satisfaction the amusement fading from his 'old friend's' face.

"I'm only here to warn you to stay away from Evelyn and to give up this ridiculous farce as her secret admirer."

St. Aldwyn regarded him for a moment before he answered, "I've no interest in Evelyn beyond friendship."

"Well, consider your friendship over."

"This conversation seems awfully familiar, does it not?" St. Aldwyn remarked. "Bath, I believe it was?"

Matthew clenched his jaw. "Don't test me St. Aldwyn. I've been lenient beyond reason and if you so much as touch her again, I will rip you apart."

"Be that as it may, I'm not secretly courting Evelyn. That would imply that I have an interest in marriage, which I can assure you, I do not."

Matthew flicked the note across the desk. "So you did not send her this note, along with every damn sweet in London?"

St. Aldwyn did not touch the note, nor spare it a glance. "No, I did not send her that note."

Matthew cursed. He'd been so certain it was St. Aldwyn behind this farce, so certain that he would put a stop to this secret admirer business once and for all. It annoyed him that he was no closer to the identity of the man than he was when he first saw the tree. It had been deliberately done, so deliberately that there would be no chance he could not have missed it. Which he had. Until Westfield pointed it out. This admirer wanted to be noticed by far more than just Evelyn.

"Thank you for your time," Matthew said gruffly, snatching up the note, tension evident in his frame. "If you will excuse me, I have some things to settle before this evening."

"Of course," St. Aldwyn stood. "If you need any assistance with this matter, you know where to find me."

"Thank you, but no."

St. Aldwyn watched Grey take his leave with a smile. He did not think Grey was satisfied with the outcome of his visit, but perhaps that was not a bad thing. He might not have sent Evelyn the note, but he was happy it rattled Grey's composure.

Too long his friend had secluded himself in the country, effectively cutting himself out of society and the life of the people who loved him. Granted, St. Aldwyn had made a big mistake all those years ago, but in his defense, he hadn't been aware Grey had formed such a deep attachment to the trollop, or he would have avoided her like the plague.

Now fate had gifted him with a second chance at friendship even though said friend was proving to be stubborn. Curious how Lady Evelyn handled all the attention showered upon her, he decided perhaps it was time to pay a visit to the Tremaine residence.

St. Aldwyn's conversation was still fresh in Matthew's mind on his way to his town house. No matter how he tried, the memory of that night, all those years ago, never quite left him. Bitterly he wondered if it ever would. Even after six years that woman still had the power to fire the blood in his veins to boiling point. He hated everything about her, the arrogant tilt of her head, that ever-taunting gleam in her coal-black eyes. The sound of her voice.

When he'd caught her in bed with St. Aldwyn he'd reacted rashly. Blindly. He should have demanded an explanation from his friend, and perhaps not exiled himself to the extent that he had done.

His steps continued, echoing through the frigid London air. Turmoil raged in his heart. Self-loathing poured through him, boiling through his veins. That bitch could still ruin his life even after all these years. He would not let her win. His mouth twisted. Hell, how she'd fooled them all. And to think he'd thought himself in love with her. He supposed St. Aldwyn had done him a favor, might even have saved him from marrying that whore. What a travesty.

Yet it changed nothing. It didn't erase the unfortunate end of their friendship, his seclusion for six years and the hollow emptiness in his heart. A hollow emptiness only one woman could fill, but refused to. Why would St. Aldwyn not leave him be? Why would he not stop provoking him? In fact, the bastard seemed to delight in it.

Deliberately he forced the tension from his jaw. It would do him no

good to reflect on things he couldn't change. His priority was Evelyn and securing her hand in marriage. He would not let some fop of an admirer cause doubt to enter his mind.

He hurried up the front stairs when he reached his home, impatient to see Evelyn again. His butler opened the door with impeccable timing, but with a face full of panic. "Sir! There is—"

His poor butler never finished his sentence. It was interrupted by the rich purr of a female voice.

"Good evening darling. I've been waiting for you for quite some time."

Matthew's heart nearly stopped as he watched the one woman immerge from the shadows he never wanted to see again, a glass of whisky in her hand.

Charlotte.

Chapter 12

“What about the Earl of Clarence?”

Evelyn looked around the morning room where two pairs of eyes scrutinized her. She sighed. “I’ve never even spoke one word to him.”

They were all trying to figure out who her mystery admirer was. So far no gentlemen came up to scratch.

“Are you sure it’s not Grey?” Belle asked.

“No,” Evelyn said with a shake of her head. If it hadn’t been for Matthew’s reaction to the note, she might have entertained the idea, but he had been furious. “You should have seen his face when he saw all the treats. Not to mention his reaction to the note. I’ve never seen anyone so calm in their anger before.”

Belle clapped her hands together. “He’s jealous, how exciting! Although it would be best to figure out who this mystery admirer is before the Earl does something rash.”

“I doubt he would do anything to cause a scandal,” Evelyn said unconvinced. She’d overheard the Countess of Gatesbourne mention that the Earl had once been a charming rake, but that seclusion had turned him into a bore, albeit a handsome one.

Jo and Belle exchanged a glance, and then gave her a have you lost your marbles look. They weren’t convinced either.

“What about Wes?” Evelyn asked. It made sense. He could be just about the only other man aside from her brother who knew her that well.

“I don’t think so,” Jo said considering her question. “He enjoys watching events unfold, not taking part in the action.”

Belle nodded. “That’s true. He can be such a bore, lurking in the shadows.”

“He deliberately provoked Matthew by flirting with me.”

A moment of silence passed before they all burst out in laughter. Wes might flirt, yes, but that was about the extent of it. He loved himself too much to get caught in a situation that might end up in a brawl.

"Perhaps your mystery man is deliberately trying to provoke the Earl?" Jo suggested. "An enemy perhaps?"

Belle scratched her head in thought. "It makes sense. Why else would he remain nameless?" she pointed out.

"And he hinted he would see you tonight," Jo said, her eyes wide.

Yet another problem she faced. Matthew would track her every move like a hawk. The mystery man would be watching too, and once again Evelyn had the distinct impression of being a pawn in a game of chess.

Her gaze travelled fondly over the faces of her friends. They would do anything for her and she in return, would do anything for them. Like her they remained unmarried by their own choice. Unlike her they did not have a stubborn Earl determined to leg-shackle them into exile.

"I daresay St. Aldwyn and the Earl have proven to be enemies," Jo murmured.

Belle gave a shocked gasp. "Would that not be the frosting on the delicious yummy cake?"

St. Aldwyn? Now that was a distinct possibility, one worth looking into. From the moment he found her in Bath she suspected he had an agenda for not dragging her to her brother, tattered reputation and all. She made the perfect pawn for their little battle.

An image of Matthew's tall hulky frame, dark wavy hair, and green eyes filled her mind. His eyes held the fiery gleam of wicked secrets and age old wisdom. A man surrounded by a veil of temptation, danger and pain. The sort of man that would normally have her hiding behind a potted plant. It did not seem fair that his eyes burned with fire when he looked at her, making her want rip off his clothes.

A shudder rippled through her.

"Evelyn? Are you all right?"

Jo's question pulled her gaze upward. "Yes of course," she said, a touch too breathless for her liking and unable to keep the hitch of wistfulness from her voice. The man had the ability to reduce her to a shivering mess.

Belle frowned. "So do you think your admirer might be St. Aldwyn?"

Evelyn shrugged. "I'm not sure. He's certainly up to something so it might be worth looking into."

Jo reached over to touch Evelyn's hand. "If St. Aldwyn is involved it's safe to assume your brother may be too."

Evelyn blinked. She hadn't thought that far.

"What does your brother say about this entire business with the Earl?" Belle asked.

Simon? Well, he couldn't be more pleased she'd finally attracted a suitor. He truly believed she would not resist the match.

"He's been quite tight lipped over the courtship," Evelyn admitted with a lift of her shoulders. "But he keeps staring at me with this little smile. I sometimes get the urge to throw a loaf of bread at him, just to wipe that ridiculous twitch from his face."

Both girls made a sound between a laugh and a snort.

Jo recovered first. "Wes mentioned an ongoing wager in the betting book of Whites. If there is money at stake almost anyone could be your admirer."

Marvelous. Another wager.

"The gifts alone must have cost a fortune," Evelyn pointed out.

"Money might not be all that's on the line," Belle suggested. "For all we know they are wagering castles!"

Castles? How like men it would be to wager family estates.

Evelyn's attention was drawn to the door when the butler suddenly appeared, the spawn of the devil looming behind him.

St. Aldwyn pushed his significantly bigger body passed poor Walter, not giving the butler a chance to announce him.

"Ladies," he murmured as he came to stand before three shocked faces. He was used to seeing simpering young misses shocked in his presence, some even fainted, but seeing it on these particular three women gave him a great level satisfaction.

"My lord, how very good of you to—"

"What are you doing here?" Jo interrupted rudely.

Evelyn's head whipped to her friend with wide eyes. She cleared her throat and gave Jo a warning glance before she said, "Simon is out on errands."

"I gathered as much," he replied with a brilliant smile, plopping down next to Jo, unfazed by her rudeness. Evelyn saw her friend stiffen, no doubt feeling crowded next to his much bigger frame. It might be her imagination, but she got the impression of animosity between them, though one might say Damien enjoyed annoying Jo.

Perhaps Jo wasn't so far off from being in the same wagon as Evelyn. An intriguing notion, one she wouldn't dwell on. St. Aldwyn would never settle down.

"Would you like to join us for tea?" Evelyn asked in a deceptively pleasant voice. This was their chance to find out if he was the secret admirer.

He rewarded her with a brilliant smile. "A delightful idea. That is if I haven't interrupted your daily gossips."

Josephine rolled her eyes.

“Not at all, my lord,” Belle purred flirtatiously. “Your presence is meant to be.”

It was Evelyn’s turn to cast her eyes heavenward.

“We were discussing the current events of the Season.”

Damien nodded thoughtfully, but not before giving Belle an odd look. “It has been quite the interesting Season so far, I agree.”

Evelyn gave a friendly laugh, perhaps too friendly. “Interesting yes, it has been that.”

“Very interesting,” Belle chirped. “It seems our Evelyn has garnered the affection of a gentleman who wishes to remain anonymous.”

“Indeed?” Damien murmured as his gaze settled on Evelyn. “You should be careful Lady Evelyn. Men who wish to stay anonymous usually have something to hide.”

“Do you have something to hide, my lord?”

He chuckled and Evelyn could not help but compare the throaty sound to the soft timbre that was Matthew’s laugh.

“I’m an open book, my lady.”

Jo snorted. “That’s an understatement.”

Evelyn took a sip of her tea, studying St. Aldwyn over the rim of her cup. No, he was not her mystery man, but he might know the identity. Yet she suspected he would not be such an open book in front of her friends, so she would need to pull him aside tonight.

It occurred to Evelyn, a few hours later at the Richmond Ball that perhaps she should have danced more instead of lurking beside potted plants. Perhaps then, her feet wouldn’t feel as though they were about to fall off. She’d hardly had a moment of rest, and decided she would join the wallflowers against their wall, and sit on her behind, legs outstretched.

Fortunately the evening was almost over, unfortunately she had another dance. A few onlookers glanced her way, but Evelyn did not care. She must look a fright, wearing one of Madam De La Frey’s vivid green gowns, reminding her of a forest, or, Evelyn crinkled her eyes in thought, seaweed. Yet she sat amongst the dreary wallflowers, a vibrant flower amongst lusterless twigs, and not very ladylike too, with her shoulders drooped and her legs outstretch.

“Well, aren’t you a sight, Lady Evelyn,” Wesley drawled, appearing before her, drawing giggles from the wallflowers.

“How gracious of you to notice.”

Wesley grinned. “I daresay I’m not the only one.”

Evelyn chuckled. “If you are here to lure me to the dance floor, please, I cannot.”

Wesley shook his head. “I am but here to offer you some company. I

do so enjoy yours, you see.”

He winked at the lady sitting two chairs down.

“You are such a rogue, Wes. There are more interesting conversations for you than mine.”

“You wound me, my lady. I hang onto every word you say.”

A niggling sensation she couldn't quite grasp at the back of her mind caused Evelyn to pause. She shook it off.

“I see that your browbeater isn't here to keep all the young gents at bay with his glare.”

Evelyn stifled a laugh. It was true. Matthew had yet to make an appearance. She wondered if he even would.

“He has abandoned his post, it would seem. Not very good for my feet,” she wiggled one foot in demonstration.

“If you require protection, I will gladly pledge my service to you.”

Evelyn glimpsed Damien approaching. “No need, kind knight, I have but one dragon to slay and my quest is over.”

Damien came up beside Wesley. “Wetherby,” he nodded.

“St. Aldwyn,” Wesley greeted with good humor, unperturbed by the incorrect delivery of his title.

He held out his arm for Evelyn, “I believe this is my dance, Lady Evelyn.”

Skirts shuffling, Evelyn reluctantly rose to put her arm in his. She refrained from groaning in pain.

Wesley bent to pick something off the ground.

He held out a small note to Evelyn. “You must have dropped this, Lady Evelyn.”

With a frown she took the note, ignoring Damien's curious glance. How had it gotten in her skirts?

“Thank you.”

With a bow Wesley took Evelyn's seat amongst the wallflowers and giggles erupted, leaving Damien to guide her onto the dance floor. The beat of the Waltz drifted through the air, chasing away the chatter and laughter and to Evelyn's surprise, the dull discomfort in her feet. She had always loved the sound of music though she rarely played herself.

Damien's hand moved to the small of her back.

“So my lady, to what do I owe the pleasure of this dance?”

A fair question, Evelyn supposed. She had practically shoved her dance card in his face. How else was she supposed to get him alone?

“I gathered you may know something of my secret admirer.”

He lifted a dark brow in question. “How did you gather that, pray tell.”

She hesitated before answering, “A logical deduction I would say. You are always in the thick of things, my lord.”

Damien chuckled. “But a mistaken one, nonetheless. I will however

admit to curiosity. Who is this gentleman that puts our male population to shame with his extravagant gifts?"

Evelyn laughed at his put out tone, but became distracted by the sight of Matthew sauntering through the ballroom doors with her brother. Her heart gave the briefest flutter in her chest. It's only natural that they would renew their friendship. But what of Damien? He might have done rather horrid things in the past, but he deserved a second chance, just like Matthew.

From across the room their eyes met and locked. His grin spread from ear to ear, until his eyes landed on her dance partner. His smile turned downward. Evelyn supposed she should have pretended to be ignorant of his arrival, but that would be silly and provoke him in such a way he would attach himself to her side for the remainder the evening, scaring away anyone who dared come near her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed when, returning her attention to Damien, she trod heavily on his foot. "I'm so sorry!"

She had stumbled awkwardly too, and Damien had to grasp her arm until she righted herself and picked up the steps of the dance again. A few of the dancers close to them looked at her with concern. She flicked a quick glance in Matthew's direction and saw his narrowed eyes glare at them. Did he think she had done it on purpose?

"My fault entirely," Damien assured her in such a fashion she wondered if indeed, it had been his fault. "I only hope my back survives the daggers being glared into it."

Evelyn let out a half-pressed laugh, embarrassed that he had seen her ogling Matthew, even though the man knew almost every intimate detail of her life. He swirled her around a few times so quickly that Evelyn was breathless when she stopped. She laughed in delight.

Finally, the set came to an end, and she rested her hand on Damien's sleeve.

"Thank you," she murmured with a smile. "It was a delightful way to end the evening even if I had to force you to endure it."

"I beg your pardon?" he said aghast, playing a hand over his heart. "It is always a pleasure to dance with you, even though my feet suffer the consequences."

Evelyn blushed at the reminder of her blunder.

"Come, let us not give Grey any more reason to dagger my back," he murmured with a wiggle of his brows, directing her through the crowd, toward Lady Josephine.

"So you have no clue to my secret admirer's identity?" Evelyn asked searching his eyes.

"On my honor, I am just as clueless as you are, my lady."

Evelyn nodded, smiling when they reached Jo, who shot Damien a frosty glare, accusation bright in her eyes. Her face however softened

when it returned to Evelyn.

"Are you all right? I thought I saw you stumble?"

Ah.

"I am fine," Evelyn put her friend at rest, "I cannot say the same for his feet."

She remembered the note then, and wondered how she would read it without drawing the attention of unwanted individuals—such as, Matthew... or Damien... or her brother.

Evelyn glanced at her friend, but Jo was now in a heated argument with St. Aldwyn. Not wasting another moment she pulled the note from her pocket and opened it in the palm of her hand. Her eyes ran over the content in quick examination before enclosing the note in a tight fist, pocketing it again, aghast.

Meet me in the library.

Her eyes darted from left to right in fear that someone took note of the action. Could this be from her secret admirer? She took one step back, another and another, her eyes penned on the heated argument of her friends, paying her no regard, as she retreated silently.

If she was going to meet this admirer, it must happen now. No doubt her brother and Matthew were making their way toward her this very second. With one last sweep of the room, she disappeared into the crowd.

The library was dark and stuffy, not even the light from the moon protruding through the thick curtains. Evelyn stroked her hands gingerly over her arms. She had stumbled and made her way through the darkness until she'd knocked into the settee. That had been ten minutes ago.

Had she found the note too late? Had her secret admirer vanished from the midst of her fingertips? She couldn't stay much longer, not without her brother catching wind of her disappearance. Drat, Evelyn thought on a sigh. She had been so close before time snatched the opportunity from her grasp.

She lay back on the settee, the silence, entwined with the darkness and hard cushion of the settee soothing to her tired body. She kicked off her slippers, thoughts of being caught disappearing behind the soft lull of comfort. Evelyn inhaled the musky scent of the room as her lashes lowered. It smelled of dust and old books. It reminded her of the reason she loved reading books of almost any sort, the smell of their leather bindings and old paper drifting gently through the air was magnetic in its pull.

The sound of a door creaking and light filtering into the room lifted her spell of comfort and a resounding click echoed through the room as the door closed, plunging the room into complete darkness again.

Evelyn's eyes popped open and her heart thrashed wildly in her chest. In one swift movement she rolled onto her stomach and peeked over the armrest of the settee.

"Is someone there?" she asked, hushed but clear.

Heavy footsteps approached her.

Evelyn rose until she rested on her knees, still on the settee.

"Who is there?" she asked in a sharp, clipped voice. "I demand an answer."

The figure came to stop before her and with slitted eyes she made out arms folding over a wide chest. Then the figure spoke up, "Well, aren't you a demanding little thing tonight."

Oh good. Him.

"You nearly scared me to death," Evelyn accused before remembering she wasn't supposed to be here. Alone.

"What in the blazes are you doing?"

His unhappiness at finding her here alone vibrated through his booming voice. What was she to say? *I received a note from my admirer to meet him here*, did not seem wise.

He leaned forward to loom over her.

"My feet hurt," Evelyn murmured. That at least was the truth.

"Is that so? I always seem to find you in places you aren't supposed to be."

"Perhaps you are the one always in places you aren't supposed to be," she quipped back. Evelyn wasn't sure, but she thought he smiled. He propped down next to her.

"Your feet hurt?" The question was asked gently.

Evelyn nodded then remembered he wouldn't be able to see it. "Yes," she murmured and settled back on her behind, "a terrible ache of discomfort and pain."

"Lie back against the armrest and rest your feet on my lap."

"Why?" She did not hide the suspicion in her voice.

Before Evelyn could blink she was in his arms and deposit back against the armrest, her legs firmly planted on his lap. Before she could protest he took one foot in his hands and started to rotate this thumb in a very pleasurable way.

Evelyn inhaled sharply at his touch and her breath came out as a groan. "Oh, that is so good."

He chuckled again. "If you danced only with me sweetheart, your feet would not hurt as much."

Evelyn's response was a sound of pleasure.

"I saw you stumble in your waltz with St. Aldwyn."

Evelyn groaned when he took her other foot and repeated the action.

"Ah yes, your fault, or my feet's fault, not certain which," Evelyn

murmured almost incoherent, her attention on his hands and their magic.

“When I saw you leave the ballroom, I followed you.”

Evelyn eyes popped open and then closed again when he pressed his thumb into the arch of her heel.

“I should not have stayed so long, but it was so quiet and comfortable.”

“I hear St. Aldwyn came to call on you today.”

“Ah yes,” she whispered and shivered in delight as Matthew continued to circle his thumb just beneath her toes. “He came, Simon wasn’t there, and I invited him for tea. He’s not the admirer.”

Matthew forced himself to relax. He had thought the worst when he’d followed her, even stood outside the library doors for ten minutes in dread of what he might find, but her feet had hurt.

“We can’t stay here much longer, love,” he whispered. “Your friends will be searching for you soon enough.”

“Let the cavalry come, you are doing trickery to my feet.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “Nevertheless, it is time,” Matthew replied warmly.

“I should go,” she agreed. Her were feet much better now.

“Yes,” he said, clenching his fist to restrain himself from pulling her into his arms. He did however pull her into a sitting position and slipped her slippers back onto her feet.

“Thank you,” Evelyn murmured.

He directed her to the door, careful that she did not stumble over anything in the dark. “Perhaps you should take care and avoid dark libraries in the future, love, lest you want to be ravished.”

“Perhaps.” She frowned when he followed her through the door. “Should you not wait a few minutes before you follow?”

Matthew snorted.

Evelyn was too sated from his glorious foot rub to care. Thank you secret admirer, she thought happily. It would however, be her last thought on him. She was done wasting her time on a man that didn’t want to be found.

They reentered the ballroom together, but he left her in her brother’s line of vision.

“Until next time, love,” he murmured.

And then he was gone, just like that. How peculiar. Usually he attached himself to her side. Evelyn felt oddly off balance at his sudden and easy dismissal after such a pleasurable foot rub. No one had even taken notice of them. It appeared the ton thought them a match. It was her turn to snort. One foot rub did not make for a marriage, Evelyn mused. Neither did one night of passion.

“There you are my dear,” Simon said with a smile as he reached

her.

Evelyn returned his smile.

“You really must tell me what you did to scare St. Aldwyn off. That method might come in handy one day.”

Evelyn’s startled gaze drew a chuckle from her brother.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” she murmured, her mind starting to race again. It must have been Jo. They had exchanged words before she left.

“I heard St. Aldwyn came to call on you today?” Her brother mentioned rather innocently. Too innocently.

“Not on me brother, on you.” She pointed a finger at his chest.

“Oh?”

“Yes.” She emphasized with a nod.

“I wasn’t at home.”

“I know! That is why I invited your friend to join us for tea. You were out.”

Evelyn narrowed her eyes on him, she continued to ask, “Are you spying on me?”

“Then,” Simon began, ignoring her question, “I see you dancing with him and just after that he ran for the hills.”

Evelyn lifted a brow. He hardly ran for the hills.

“As if I could inspire such a display of passion from that man,” she muttered dryly. “But if you must know, he and Jo exchanged words after our dance. The question would be better directed at her.”

Simon’s face brightened with sudden intrigued. “Well, I say.”

He put his arms around her shoulders in a display of brotherly affection. “Let’s call it a night sis, I’m bone tired.”

Evelyn wasn’t about to argue with that.

Chapter 13

“I cannot believe you talked me into doing this,” Evelyn complained as she followed Jo through the dirty streets of a shady part of London. Why she’d ever agreed to accompany her friend to meet the donators of some charity, she did not know.

Jo was the founder of all the charities she supported and intimately involved in every last one of them. Evelyn found herself a little embarrassed not knowing this of her dearest friend.

“I had no one else to ask. Besides it won’t take that long,” Jo replied in a hushed tone, trying not to draw attention to them.

Evelyn rather thought it did not matter whether Jo spoke in hushed tones or bellowed it out at the top of her voice. The cloaks they wore stood out like two oak trees in a clearing of dirt. She scanned her surroundings from beneath her hood. The streets were filled with drunkards and woman of loose morals, searching for attention in boisterous ways.

“You should bring a footman to accompany you to these parts of town. Or a guard of sorts. Where are we anyway?”

Jo laughed. “White Chapel, I believe. And a guard would attract even more attention than two people slipping in and out unnoticed.”

Not entirely unnoticed, Evelyn mused. Amongst the low necklines of the woman sashaying about and the drunkards singing at the top of their lungs (grabbing their private parts for heaven’s sakes!) two cloaked figures hardly went unnoticed.

“Why did you never tell me you were the founder of all the charities you support?” Evelyn probed further, never taking her eyes off the busy street. “I would have donated or become more involved had I known.”

“Exactly,” Jo said with a firm nod of her head. “You would have felt

it your duty to support me and not because you believed in the charities.”

Evelyn frowned. “Does the reason matter?”

Jo shrugged. “I suppose not, we have plenty of people with deep pockets. But a fiery passion to help others, now that we are in need off.”

Little prickles of guilt stabbed in Evelyn’s chest. She admired Jo’s passion and her endless need to defend and protect.

“Perhaps I should be more like you.”

“One of me is enough!” Jo said with a quick smile in Evelyn’s direction. “But you help people too, just differently than I do.”

Evelyn wasn’t so certain about that. While she did occasionally help friends, family and the wayward servant, she only did so when they asked. She did not run around shady parts of town looking for strangers to help, like Jo did.

Jo grabbed her hand and dragged her across the street.

“We’re almost there!”

Oh good.

The part they were traipsing down was dangerous and Evelyn had this odd stirring in the pit of her stomach that something bad barreled down their way. She almost asked where there was but caught herself when Jo came to a sudden halt before a building that was quite literally falling apart. Shattered windows displayed the outer walls and bricks so crumbled Evelyn would not be surprised if but one brick held the entire building in place. Yet it wasn’t the ruined exterior that caught her attention but the freshly painted green door.

Jo knocked on the green door four times, hesitated two seconds and knocked another three times. A second passed before the door swung open to reveal what Evelyn could only describe as a mountain, the largest man she had ever seen. To her horror her jaw fell open at the sight of the heavily built man. She snapped it shut even as her gaze traveled the length of him—top to bottom. Bottom to top. He flashed her knowing smile when their eyes locked. Her cheeks flamed.

“James,” Jo greeted with a smile.

The mountain shifted his gaze to Jo.

“Josephine, you look radiant as always,” he purred, before his gaze turned back to Evelyn.

“And who is this lovely creature you’ve brought with you?”

Oh my.

“James, this is Evelyn, one of my closest friends,” Jo introduced them, oddly refraining from using her title. They must be very close.

“Evelyn kindly agreed to accompany me in Charles’s absence,” Jo finished.

Evelyn snorted. “More like bullied me into agreeing,” she said,

failing to suppress a smile.

The mountain's smile widened, giving him almost a boyish look as he came forward and took her hand. He placed a wicked kiss on her wrist.

"It's always a pleasure to meet a beautiful young lady, especially one I have heard so much about."

Evelyn's face reddened even more. This James was a wicked scoundrel, with brownish red hair and clear blue eyes that never appeared to stop smiling. Even his intimidating form didn't subtract from his handsomeness.

"Good things I hope."

James leaned down to whisper in her ear, "To my utter disappointment."

Evelyn laughed throatily.

Jo snorted. "Stop ogling my friend and let us inside," she admonished before Evelyn could reply.

She was not surprised by Jo's forwardness. In this part of town it would look odd if you had any manners. With a forward step she proceeded to follow them through the green door and into an empty and unmistakably abandoned house of some sort. It was cold and barren, devoid of any warmth and light. It was what Evelyn imagined a prison felt like, certain after this meeting had been concluded no evidence that it ever occurred would be found.

Just what exactly was Jo involved in?

"Is everyone present, James?" She heard her friend ask.

"Yes, you were the last to arrive," the mountain replied and glanced uncertainly at Evelyn.

"Good," Jo said but caught the look. "I wouldn't have asked her to join us if I did not trust her."

Evelyn's eyes narrowed on Jo's back as she followed them up a flight stairs. The "join us" hadn't escaped her notice. So there was more afoot than just escorting Jo to a meeting.

"If you wanted to include me in whatever nefarious plans you have up your sleeve, all you had to do was ask."

Jo chuckled. "I would have asked you to join our little group," she paused before continuing, "eventually. But I have a problem that refuses to disappear and we need your help."

Jo stopped outside another green door and turned toward her with all seriousness.

"St. Aldwyn."

"Damien? What has he done now?" Except keep secrets from her.

"What has he not done? But at the moment he has this hair brained notion that we are up to no good and watches me like a hawk, determined to figure out what we are up to."

“He’s a very clever man.”

“That’s not the point,” Jo said fiercely. “St. Aldwyn can never find out what we are doing Evelyn, it could ruin us all.”

Her brow furrowed. “I don’t see how I can be of any help. He would never listen to me,” Evelyn replied, deciding it was in her best interest to ignore the “ruin us” part.

“I need you to keep him occupied at any events he decides to lurk about.”

“I still don’t understand Jo, why would he think you up to anything? And why would he care? That man cares about nothing except himself, and well, and perhaps my brother.”

Jo shook her head. “I’m not certain, but ever since Grey came back to London he has been watching me like a hawk.”

How odd.

Evelyn nodded slowly. “Very well, but why have you brought me to this meeting?”

Babysitting St. Aldwyn seemed an easy enough task. Evelyn however didn’t mention that keeping Damien occupied might provoke Matthew. The man had rather insane behavior when it came to Damien. On the other hand, perhaps this could be beneficial to them both, since it would force them to actually interact with one another.

“You need to understand what is at stake and to be blunt, if you are part of us your reputation is also on the line,” Jo answered in all honesty.

Evelyn nodded, a smile creeping across her face. Who knew Jo had such a devious side.

“Yes, well it seems secrets are all the rage these days, so what’s another one tucked into the corner of my life.”

Evelyn heard James chuckle as Jo turned to open the door, but stopped to murmur over her shoulder, “Oh and you might want to hold off any matrimony plans for the moment.”

Evelyn was still blinking when Jo opened the door and marched into the room like a soldier marching into battle. Hold of matrimony plans? That won’t be a problem.

She started to follow, but gave James a curious glance when he looked at her with eyes filled with intensity.

“Is something amiss?”

“You steal my heart, and then crush it with talk of marriage,” James murmured as he covered his heart with one of his big hands in a dramatic gesture.

Evelyn tilted her head to the side as she considered him. When she saw the glint sparkle in his bright blue eyes she shook her head and threw her hands in the air. Men! She entered the room with a graceful (as much as her cloak would allow) swoop. And came to an abrupt

halt at the sight of the occupants, deciding this was all very ridiculous. Six poorly dressed persons sat about the room, so poorly dressed the ruined building seemed too spectacular for the likes of them. And what was that ghastly odor?

She looked back at James, noticing for the first time that he too, was dressed as a peasant. He certainly wasn't a peasant. In fact, on closer inspection, not one of the room's occupants looked like peasants. They looked exactly like what they were, high born peers dressed as peasants.

How very interesting.

"Good, now that everyone is present we can get on with it." A man spoke, emerging from a dark corner of the room, making his way toward Jo. He looked much like James, but a darker, harsher version of him. They had to be twins, identical twins from the looks of it.

James grabbed her hand and pulled her to a seat a few feet away, leaving Jo and the other version of James to stand alone. Her brow wrinkled as she yanked her hand out of his grasp. The other James took his time to rake his fierce gaze over everyone present before he announced in a voice of steel, "Today we decide the fate of Madeleine Loveday."

Evelyn followed Jo down the stairs and through the green door, only now it was just an old brown worn out door. She inhaled the fresh air once they reached the side of the road. Her mind still reeled, still absorbed everything she had heard. To say she was shocked would be an understatement. Even more of an understatement would be if anyone ever learned of their plans, they wouldn't just be ruined; they would be thrown into jail or be shipped off to the continent.

"Are you all right?" Jo asked her hesitantly.

She thought about that, then heaved a heavy sigh before she replied, "I thought I knew everything about you and this," Evelyn waved toward the building, "it's all so shocking that you kept this from me. I would never betray you."

"I know," Jo whispered. "I wanted to tell you, even tried to, but this isn't about me, there is a lot at stake."

Evelyn nodded in understanding. "Why did you get involved in such things?"

"I—" Jo paused and stared at the old brownish door they'd moments ago emerged from. "I was tired of just existing, of enduring life and dull commitments. There had to be more than being raised only in preparation to make a good match. I wanted to feel alive, but most importantly, I needed something to live for."

Evelyn put her hand on Jo's shoulder, "I understand. I feel the same."

And she did understand. It's the same reason she dreamed of exploring the world. She wanted to do more than exist. She wanted more from life than making a good match.

Jo nodded, her lips brightening into a smile. "For a moment I was certain you would run panicked from the building."

Evelyn grunted. She had surprised herself by not doing just that.

"I almost did," she responded dryly, causing Jo to laugh.

"So—"

"What in everlasting hell are the two of you doing here?"

At the booming voice they both whirled around. The Marquis of Warton, who happened to be Jo's brother, stood a few feet away with a thunderous expression on his face, his hands fisted against his side. He looked ready to murder them.

Evelyn swallowed. This would not end well.

As if on cue the Marquis began to shout, causing onlookers to stop and stare at the three of them.

"I asked what the hell you are doing here. Have you any idea how dangerous it is to wander around these parts unescorted! I cannot believe you would risk your life for some charity meeting, and this is about a one of your charities, isn't it?"

The last was said in such a deadly whisper Evelyn shuddered.

"Isn't it?" he shouted even louder when they only gawked at him.

The Marquis looked ready to explode. Jo on the other hand had a stubborn glint in her eyes, a glint Evelyn knew well.

"What are you doing here dear brother, if it's so dangerous?"

Brahm's face flushed red.

"It's not her fault!" Evelyn interrupted before things got out of hand. She cringed when he turned those blazing eyes on her, but held strong. Jo's brother was famous for his temper, but he was all growls and no teeth.

"I asked Jo to accompany me," Evelyn said quickly, before he started to shout again. "To... uh...meet someone."

"To meet whom?" Brahm asked, lifting a thick dark brow, his suspicion clear.

Evelyn hesitated, her mind spinning, not certain who would seem plausible to meet here.

"Well, not meet someone," she hedged as her mind raced. "I was to deliver money to the man that's been blackmailing me," she blurted and cringed at her ridiculous lie.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked dumbstruck.

"I'm being blackmailed," she stated clearly, straightening her back, but not before she saw Jo's mouth fall open. If the situation didn't call for superb acting she would've laughed at the shock and disbelief playing across their features.

“Why would anyone blackmail a lady?” Brahm asked, his anger all but forgotten.

“Well, you see... because I... because there...in the darkness...in a garden... me... did I mention it was dark?” she trailed off, hoping he wouldn’t make her spell out what her little scene brought to mind, but by the dawning expression on his face he certainly got the picture.

“Who is the bastard?” Brahm boomed, his anger returning tenfold.

Evelyn had nearly jumped out of her skin, but really, what had she expected? This was Brahm, his emotions always came out in extremes.

“Uh, I would rather not reveal his identity,” she said hesitantly, aware Jo stifled a laugh. Evelyn shot her a glare.

“You will tell me his name, Lady Evelyn.”

When Evelyn didn’t answer he boomed, “Now!”

“The Earl of Grey,” she muttered.

The name rolled off her tongue without a moment of hesitancy. Perhaps if she had thought about it, she might’ve realized it was an exceedingly bad idea, since it became clear he would run straight to her brother. Wesley would’ve have been a safer bet. Matthew on the other hand would know she’d lied and demand the reason for being found in White Chapel. Was it possible part of her wanted him to find out?

“Son of a bitch,” Brahm bellowed, once more causing both girls to jump.

The best she could hope for was that the Marquis escort her home and pray her brother was off sampling the busty charms of some widow. But even so, Evelyn doubted Brahm would leave the matter before her brother was apprised of her wrong doing.

He gave her a long look. “Why didn’t you go to your brother?”

How very male of him to ask.

Evelyn shrugged. “If I paid the blackmailer then my brother would never be the wiser.”

His face darkened even more.

“Did you not even consider the possibility that the blackmailer would never stop blackmailing you and would get more daring over time?”

“I considered that,” Evelyn lied with a nod. “However, since I’m not used to being blackmailed I’ve no clue what to do except react to the immediate threat.”

“This is exactly why women your age should be married.”

Heat flared in her cheeks at his matter of a fact comment. “Now you’re just being rude.”

“Wait a minute,” Jo intervened, the amusement gone from her face. “We have as much right to stay unmarried as you.”

Brahm snorted. “Rights, Josephine?” he sneered. “No woman has

any, and just as well, seeing as you've yet again proved the stupidity of your species by being caught in this neighborhood because you didn't know any better than to take this situation to the head of your family."

"Stupidity?" Josephine shouted at her brother. "We didn't take it up with you or Westfield yes, but the real question you should ask is why we never took it up with you in the first place!"

Brahm clenched his teeth, "Enlighten me."

"You'd have gone all brutish and beat your chest like a mindless ape and locked us away until the situation was resolved, like some nitwit ninnies who cannot fend for themselves."

"You can't fend for yourselves!" Brahm shouted back. "Have you taken a look around these streets? Have you even considered that the blackmailer may have planned to kidnap or murder you?"

"Yes Brahm," Jo said snippily. "The blackmailer would kidnap or kill his source of income. Do you listen to your way of reasoning? I'm not some mindless nitwit who cannot assess dangerous situations. I knew exactly what I was getting into when I joined this endeavor."

Evelyn had a distinct impression their conversation wasn't about her anymore.

"So you freely admit you are aware of the danger and you still continue to venture on, consequences be damned?"

"I..." He had her there. Brute. "There may be times, like now, but only because we could resolve this issue without incident."

Brahm lifted an infuriating brow. "Without incident you say. Well we will see what Westfield has to say about this little incident, won't we?"

He motioned them to his carriage standing down the street. Drat. They should have noticed it when they exited the building. Obviously they needed to work on their attention to detail.

Evelyn groaned. Her brother didn't know about her indiscretion, only that Matthew had singled her out and was now courting her. If he believed her to be compromised he might throw all his weight behind the courtship. And if Matthew somehow received word about this little meeting, he would not only watch her like a hawk but be determined to find out what they were up to. Perhaps it might work in their favor, and they would need favor if they were to succeed in their plans to kidnap Madeleine Loveday.

Chapter 14

Her brother's study had always been a place of solitude for Evelyn. Sometimes she would read in the very chair she sat in now while he worked on his accounts. Other times she would enjoy a glass of brandy in secret, when he was off at his club. Today however, no solitude was to be enjoyed. She sat, arms folded in her lap, with not one, not two, but three glinting pairs of eyes glaring her way.

They had yet to say a word after Warton shouted his tale of finding them in White Chapel, and after which he promptly stormed out. Apparently the mere sight of Matthew was enough to set his anger to biblical proportions, and his booming voice travelled through the halls of her home moments after they arrived, together with flailing arms and stomping steps.

How unfortunate that her bother wasn't the only witness to her being dragged home, but St. Aldwyn and Matthew as well. Their shock at the sight of the Marquis of Warton in front of them all, shouting like a madman, waving his arms about before storming out, had been quite comical. For the briefest of moments, when they all stood in the hallway in stunned silence, Evelyn thought mayhem would break loose. Unfortunate really. She could have slipped away amidst the turmoil.

Now she sat, in her place of usual solitude, waiting for the confrontation that would soon follow. Her eyes shifted to lock with the heated gaze of Matthew and her breath hitched. Those brilliant green eyes were alight with anger and passion. She imagined his mind mulling over every detail, no matter how small. He would either accept her ridiculous tale of blackmail as truth, but for another reason, or he knew her story was hogwash and another purpose existed for them venturing into that part of London. Either way, no

conclusion would be a good one.

But all was not lost. Now that she had their undivided attention it placed her in a unique position to help her friend, even herself.

That she would go to such lengths to concoct a ridiculous lie, meant she wasn't about to divulge the real reason for their journey into White Chapel. It was why, in Evelyn's estimation, they thought to stare her down without as much as a word. They meant to intimidate her. She did not intimidate so easily.

Her brother's voice was the first to pierce the silence.

"Do you mind telling me what you were thinking wandering about in White Chapel, with only Lady Josephine as an escort?"

Evelyn wondered what they would do if they knew about the others. This tedious attempt at extracting information would have been much more vigorous, to be sure. She would however give her brother points for effort.

"Now that I think on it Simon, I'm not certain what I was thinking wandering about only escorted by Lady Josephine," she said with a shrug.

Simon's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Evelyn! This is a serious matter!"

"I am aware of that," Evelyn said, and then raked a glance over Matthew and St. Aldwyn, "But shouldn't we be discussing this in private."

Matthew, who'd been silent up till then, stirred. Their eyes locked, keeping her immobile.

"Under any other circumstance this discussion would be been between you and your brother, your legal guardian, at the moment."

At the moment?

"However," Matthew continued, "since I am the reason you're being blackmailed, I have every right to be part of this discussion."

Evelyn didn't miss the edge to his voice.

"I lied, as you are well aware," she admitted, glaring at him when he only lifted an arrogant brow.

"You lied about being blackmailed?" Simon asked in disbelief.

Oh for heaven's sake! He'd actually believed her ridiculous lie? Of course he did, he was her brother.

"Well, yes," Evelyn said flippantly. She didn't mean to be disrespectful, but she'd had just about enough male interference in her life. "I lied about it being Lord Grey in the garden with me."

She smothered a bubble of laughter when their expressions turned comical. Neither Simon nor Matthew had expected that. When their expression turned blank, so effectively removing any emotions from their features, Evelyn had this ridiculous thought of them gathering in secret, learning how to school their expressions, which was obviously

meant to intimidate. St. Aldwyn's eyes on the other hand, held a sparkle of mischief. He understood she was having sport with them.

"And who, dear sister, is this man you were alone with?" Simon asked in a furious whisper, and every word would have felt like a lash against her skin, if she hadn't been having so much fun.

"Well, let's see—"

"And don't you dare lie about this, Evelyn," Matthew interrupted.

Was she mad to shiver at the rough timbre in his unmistakably mad voice?

"Fine, if you must know, there was no man in the garden and there was no blackmailer."

At their narrow regard, Evelyn probably should have felt a pinch of nervousness but it would seem her self-preservation had evaporated. She knew Simon well enough to know he wouldn't demand the truth from her, because he knew her well enough to know that she would never tell, no matter how much he ranted.

"Why the hell would you lie to us?" her broker asked.

"To protect her troublemaking friend no doubt," St. Aldwyn said as he straightened, alert now. "Lady Josephine didn't escort your sister, Westfield, Lady Evelyn escorted her."

Evelyn shrugged, deciding they could figure it out on their own. At the very least it would keep them distracted from their plan to kidnap Madeleine Loveday. Evelyn inwardly smiled. This couldn't have worked better if she'd planned it!

Matthew stared at the vexing little trouble-maker sitting in her chair like she owned the damn world. Turmoil raged within him though he kept his expression blank. How she came up with these unbelievably ridiculous stories was beyond him. In fact, it was as ridiculous as the one she'd conjured of him being a villain.

He understood the need to protect a friend, that was admirable, if not stupidity, but what did she gain by provoking them into indignation? Or was this a ploy to distract them? The thing about Evelyn, to his utter frustration, you never truly knew whether it was just another elaborate story or whether her stories held some truth.

What would she be distracting them from? The thought jumped into his head and wouldn't leave. It seemed to bounce back and forth in the edges of his mind. The key to what they were doing in White Chapel seemed to lie in that one single thought.

He hated being lied to, especially by her. Yet she seemed to revel in it. He'd told her once before to never lie to him. She hadn't taken him seriously. And while it was a bad habit of hers to creep around in the dark with strangers, she wasn't being blackmailed for it.

If she wanted his attention, she needn't have bothered, she had it.

Always.

“Well, a venture into White Chapel must have been exhausting,” Matthew began dryly, “what with having to lurk about and all that. Wouldn’t you agree, Westfield?” he gave Westfield a knowing smile. “Some rest for a few days wouldn’t be amiss, or until she decides to speak the truth.”

He smiled when her lips parted in a gasp and her eyes widened in pique. Fate had picked him the most stubborn, defiant wench on the planet. He would thank fate later.

“I will not be sent to my room like a child!” she steamed.

“You will enlighten us to the truth then?”

Evelyn wanted to stick out her tongue in a childish display of defiance, but refrained. Did he expect she would be so easily maneuvered into telling the truth? Men were so pigheaded. But he would learn soon enough that when she put her mind to something, she could be as pigheaded as any man.

“You cannot be considering this?” she asked her brother, gesturing wildly toward Matthew.

Her eyes sparked in anger.

Simon straightened. “His idea holds merit, sis.”

“Beg your pardon?” Evelyn jumped from her chair, glaring at her brother. “You would take his advice into consideration? You are my brother and this is my home, not a prison!”

“True,” Simon nodded as if he agreed with her, “but your behavior of late has been uncharacteristic and at times inappropriate. I let it go, mostly because I assumed it to be one of your silly woman phases, but it ends now.”

Evelyn stared at her brother, her eyes wide in horror. *Some silly woman phase?* The words of that blow crushed her. It was no secret of man’s belief that women were silly and dependent, but never had she viewed her brother as a man that held the same belief. Had it been naïve of her to presume his opinion would be any different from that of any other man.

Through her haze of horror she saw her brother reach for her but it was too late, the betrayal of his words stung deep. There were some things that once said, could never be taken back.

“I can’t believe you said that,” Evelyn whispered, betrayal evident in her voice.

“Evelyn, I—”

She lifted her hand for him to stop, “Silly woman phase, Simon?”

He flinched at the hurtful note in her voice. Good.

“I suppose I should thank you for reminding me that I will never have the opportunity to live my life the way I see fit if I am under the control of a man.”

She looked over to Matthew. "I will never marry you or any other man and if you push, I will push back, harder. I will never give up my freedom, not for you, not for any man, not for any reason." Evelyn paused, tears stinging her eyes. "I have given you a chance to persuade me otherwise and my brother has reminded me why you would always fail."

With that she exited the room, slamming the door shut, aware the men watched her departure from the room, head held high.

"That went well," Simon said on a heavy sigh as he sat down behind his desk.

St. Aldwyn snorted.

Matthew gave him a knowing glance. "If that went well I would hate to be here when it does not."

He didn't say that his friend had made things infinitely more difficult for him with his careless words. Matthew had seen the look in Evelyn's eyes before she'd walked out. Stubbornness he could handle. He could even deal with her anger, but the betrayal and disappointment in those violet depths would not be so easily healed. He was defenseless against her argument because she was right. She would never live her life as she saw fit if she married him, he would hold all reins to her life. It also became undeniably clear that her reservations ran deeper than first imagined. She would now adamantly refuse any of his advances, believing they viewed her as some silly chit, like the rest of her species. Damn Westfield and his careless mouth.

"She will be wary of you now," Simon confirmed, staring at the ceiling, deep in thought, ignoring his statement.

"I am undoubtedly certain they are up to their necks in something they shouldn't be," St. Aldwyn murmured.

Matthew nodded. He'd already surmised as much. "You may be right. We will have to keep an eye on all of them if we want to determine what the hell is going on."

"I agree. There are three of them and three of us. It shouldn't be too difficult to keep track of their actions," Simon commented.

Matthew's lip curled at what was not said. St. Aldwyn would make up their party of three. He glanced at the man who now leaned against the wall, deep in thought as he stared out the window. He hadn't interfered much in the confrontation, but he had stayed. Matthew didn't know why, but he had the distinct impression that St. Aldwyn only stayed because Evelyn had been found with Lady Josephine, and even though he hated involving him, he admitted that they did need his help.

He had a bad feeling that whatever Evelyn was involved in, it was dangerous.

“Well that settles it,” Matthew said, grudgingly rising to his feet, too engrossed in his disgust to notice the smile that formed on Westfield’s face. He didn’t know it but things couldn’t have worked out better for Westfield. He had almost lost hope that his two sparring friends would never let go of the past, but he had a feeling that working together toward the same goal would be just the medicine these reluctant friends needed to let go of their hatred toward each other. Westfield doubted it was hatred though, but rather pure stubbornness that kept them at each other’s throats. It would not be easy to get them to work together in peace, but it seemed they were tolerating each other’s presence readily enough. He just hoped it didn’t backfire.

Later that day Evelyn lay propped up on her bed listening for the muffled sounds of her friends sneaking down the hallway. She was still furious with her brother even though he had every reason to be angry with her. Still it did not excuse the fact that he implied she had silly phases.

Years ago she’d entertained silly dreams of finding a love that lasted through eternity, a love that didn’t wither or die, a love beyond the scope of what man could imagine. But love didn’t come in one big grand package. It, like all other things, was exactly what you made of it. She loved her brother, but right now she wasn’t making much of her love for him. She was angry and well, a bit fearful.

Fear had her questioning her dreams. Could she be wrong? Could her dream of freedom be just that, a dream? And if a dream was but a dream and true love was but an illusion, was freedom not the biggest illusion of them all? Gah! All this reasoning and doubt gave her a pulsing ache in her head. The fact of the matter remained, Matthew wanted complete control. And he wanted her. He would not let her go without a fight. Dream or no dream, love or no love.

Evelyn shivered as she recalled his overwhelming presence. She shut her eyes tightly. There was no getting rid of him today. The image of him was etched too clearly in her mind, she could see every line of his striking face, feel the softness of his lips on hers.

A light knock on the door drew her out of her musings. The door opened and Belle slipped in, Jo following in her wake. They knew every back entrance and secret entrance into her home, so Evelyn wasn’t worried if they were seen.

Jo propped down next to her on the bed while Belle, with her hands on her hips came to stand before them with a scowl on her face.

“I can’t believe the two of you have kept me out of the circle.”

Jo snorted, rolling her eyes. “She has been going on about it ever since I told her two hours ago. Save me Evelyn, my ears are about to explode.”

Evelyn chuckled, then murmured, "This is serious, Jo. We got caught today and need to be more careful in the future. Simon will keep a close watch on me now."

Belle narrowed her eyes on them. "Yes. Jo told me about your little adventure which I might add, would never have happened had you thought to include me."

"Oh please Belle, move on," Jo said with another dramatic role of her eyes.

"The men will watch all of us closely. I won't even be surprised if they enlist St. Aldwyn's help. He is already suspicious of you Jo, and if I am going to distract him from the real situation at hand, I might as well lead my brother and Matthew in the wrong direction."

"No Evelyn," Jo said shaking her head. "We need your help if we are to pull this off. There are three of them and three of us and they are smart. They might already have figured out we are up to something."

"Evelyn has a point, Jo," Belle said thoughtfully. "She is in the best position to keep the men distracted while we put everything in place. Think about it. Westfield, Grey and possibly St. Aldwyn will be keeping an eye on Evelyn. Your brother will keep an eye on Grey and run interference whenever he suspects something underhand is going on while Wesley can keep an eye on Westfield and St. Aldwyn. It will be the perfect window of opportunity for us."

Evelyn groaned. Too many people were involved.

"Perhaps, but none of them will be distracted for long before turning their attention to all of us, if they haven't already. We will need to create a bigger distraction."

"Evelyn is right," Jo said on a sigh. "We will need a bigger distraction."

"What about the rumor Wesley mentioned last night?" Belle asked excitedly.

Evelyn frowned. "What rumor?"

"Belle, no!" Jo reprimanded, forcefully shaking her head at Belle.

"What rumor?" Evelyn asked again.

"It's nothing of importance," Jo said pointedly to Belle, causing a nesting suspicion to form in Evelyn's mind. Only one reason existed for their reluctance to tell her.

"What did Wes say?" Evelyn asked grabbing Jo's arm. "Tell me, please."

Jo gave a single reluctant nod toward Belle.

"Apparently," Belle whispered in a hushed voice, as if the impact would be any less damaging, "a certain woman was seen leaving the Earl's residence. A woman he apparently had an affair with six years ago."

Evelyn's heart turned over in her chest.

Charlotte.

Evelyn wanted to be sick. Whatever was wrong with her? She did not want to marry him, so why she did she feel as though someone had punched her in the stomach.

"That's not all," Josephine whispered, taking her hand.

"What?" Evelyn asked with a remarkably calm voice.

"They were also seen at Drury Lane, attending the opera."

The blood in Evelyn's veins turn to ice. A thousand images assailed her mind. He called here today, but yesterday... This was the reason she'd refused his advances, wasn't it? Did he mean to keep Charlotte as a mistress after he forced Evelyn into marriage?

"Are you certain?"

They glanced at each other.

"They were seen together Evelyn, but it doesn't mean they attended together," Jo murmured for reassurance.

"Yes of course," Evelyn said, the tremble in her voice belying her words. "It might not mean anything, but it doesn't matter. He can attend the opera with whomever he pleases."

The words sounded odd even to her own ears.

"Perhaps he has good reason," Belle suggested.

"No. There is no reason good enough," Evelyn said slowly. "May this serve as a reminder why I made the decision to remain unmarried and explore the world."

"Perhaps you should discuss this with him before you decide," Jo suggested.

The concern in her friend's voice pinched her heart.

Evelyn shook her head. "This might be just the distraction we need to keep the men off our scent," she murmured, causing her friends to stare at her worriedly.

Evelyn tried to reassure them. "Truly, I am fine. It took me off guard, that's all. It was something I've anticipated since I learned of their history, which was never really resolved."

Belle touched her hand in an affectionate gesture. "Are you certain you want to use these particular rumors as a distraction?"

"Of course," Evelyn replied with a smile. "I can do this."

When her friends said nothing Evelyn sighed.

"It will be fine!" she exclaimed exasperated.

Belle joined them on the bed.

"The decisions we made for our futures were never going to easy. Society frowns on a debutante who doesn't aspire to snare a duke or any husband for that matter, but who instead desires to travel or become a bona fide criminal or the world's most infamous fashion designer."

They laughed at those truths. Neither of them wanted men to rule their lives or be considered just another piece of property, or a brood mare for heirs. They desired the same opportunities afforded to men. So they made their own dreams, each different from the other. It wasn't until Evelyn met Matthew that she was forced to second guess hers. In fact, she had secretly begun to hope he might be different, but he'd dashed those foolish hopes now.

"Well, at least we haven't changed," Jo said with a laugh. "We still want to become social outcasts."

"Actually, we already are social outcasts," Belle reminded them. "Only no one has realized it yet."

They chuckled at that. Secret activities aside, it felt good to laugh again.

"We have a week to prepare for the Madeleine Loveday project," Jo reminded them suddenly. "Everything will go down at the Carrington Ball, so we need to prepare and get a plan of action ready, along with a distraction."

"I have a way to keep everyone's attention from you," Evelyn commented, not believing what she was about to suggest.

Belle and Jo glanced at each other before urging her to continue.

"We need to ensure Charlotte attends the Ball. Everything will depend on her attendance," Evelyn said calmly.

"Who is Charlotte?" Jo asked.

"Is she who I think she is?" Belle asked and Jo's eyes widened as understanding dawned.

"Evelyn no, you can't think that to be a good idea."

"It's brilliant actually," Belle chimed in.

"No," Jo said shaking her head. "It will be a mistake."

"I'll be fine Jo, really. Besides it was bound to happen eventually and I would rather have the upper hand than be surprised. And we need the distraction. No one will be able to take their eyes off us, giving us the perfect opportunity to leave the ball under a veil of scandal. It will also be the perfect opportunity to cut Matthew off once and for all."

Jo frowned, concern etched into her features.

"Are you sure that is what you want?" she asked worriedly.

"Do not worry about me Jo. I'm tougher than I look," Evelyn made a face. It sounded right. It felt horrid. But she refused to dwell on it this point in time.

"So we have the distraction, now all we need is the plan."

They turned to Belle.

"Well," Jo said with a clap of her hand. "I believe we have some planning to do."

Chapter 15

One week. That was how long Evelyn managed to avoid Matthew and an easy endeavor, it was not. But after she'd learned of the rumors, determination set in and proved helpful to such a daunting task. She refused every call he made and even refused to attend any event where she was certain he would appear, and she had it on good authority that he wouldn't be attending tonight. So when Evelyn saw Matthew heading in her direction she braced herself for trouble. Devil take it, she wasn't ready to face him yet. She had wanted to leave this confrontation for the Carrington's Ball, but it seemed Matthew had grown tired of being ignored.

Now for all her trouble of avoiding him, Evelyn had a hornet on her tail, one who also happened to look in an exceedingly foul mood. She watched him approach with growing unease. It wasn't hard to figure out why the scales of his mood had shifted to foul, determined to seek her out, instead of his unusual brooding self. He never possessed the uncanny ability to keep his true feelings buried and under control, like St. Aldwyn, but that he wasn't hiding his displeasure was telling enough. If she had any sense at all, she'd run.

"Your guard dog seems determined to catch up with you, my dear," Wes drawled from her side, nodding his head in her pursuer's direction. "I suggest you hide."

"Well, aren't you a fountain of good advice. Will you distract him while I make my escape?" Evelyn asked, her unease swelling even more. No doubt the scoundrel would enjoy witnessing her cowardice.

"And miss the chance to watch this drama unfold? Not a chance."

He laughed when Evelyn shot him a heated glare, because hell, she wished she possessed the courage to create a scene like that. It would be far better than any confrontation. But she must conserve all her

bravery for the Carrington Ball.

Then Matthew was upon them, sporting a smile so radiant her jaw dropped. Gone was any trace of a foul mood. He gave a curt nod in Wesley's direction before he bowed, rather exaggerated, before her.

"Lady Evelyn, would you do me the honor of this dance?"

No. She should say no. But dare she refuse him after avoiding him for a week? She got the faintest notion he wouldn't allow it. The rotter. He practically dared her to refuse him in front of all the onlookers with his antics. It would serve him right if she refused him. However, at the moment she held the upper hand with her knowledge of his little meetings with his former lover, so avoiding him for a week had been long enough. In all likelihood he assumed their last confrontation in her brother's study was the reason for her avoidance. He wouldn't be entirely wrong.

"It would be my pleasure," she murmured, extending her hand.

He pulled her closer as he led her onto the dance floor, then settled one hand on the curve of her waist while the other closed tightly around her gloved fingers, his eyes never leaving hers.

Evelyn almost groaned. Saints preserve her, she wasn't going to survive this. His unmistakably male scent assailed her senses and the intensity of his gaze threatened her skin to burst into flames. *He is a beast, Evelyn!* She reminded herself, a rotten beast uncaring of her feelings, no different from any man in this room.

"Lord Grey—" she began, meaning to warn him off. But he'd already whirled her onto the floor and she had to catch her breath as he held her slightly closer before putting the proper distance between them again.

"You are avoiding me, Evelyn."

"I have been busy," she muttered, casting an envious glance at the door.

"Indeed."

"You do not believe me? I can assure you, reading the new novel of JS Ross I simply could not put it down, a real page turner, that novel."

He stared at her incredulous. "You must be jesting?"

She gave him a dazzling smile. "It's quite good. You should consider obtaining a copy for you collection."

"So you ignored me, each time I came to call on you this week, to read a damn book?"

"Oh dear, I thought you were calling on Simon. My apologies," she replied sweetly.

At his narrowed regard she continued, "Although in my defense I was ordered to rest after my exhausting ordeal, as you will recall."

She tightened her grip a fraction as he spun them about. He had large shoulders. When he didn't answer, she glanced up into his face.

Their gaze locked.

"Ah yes, I forgot your little tryst in White Chapel."

"I would have thought you would be more concerned about me."

His condescending tone and obvious indifference irritated her.

"You lied about a garden tryst and being blackmailed for it." Bending his head until his lips touched her ear, he whispered, "Then you avoid me for a week, you don't deserve my concern, sweetheart."

She stumbled, and he caught her, saving her from any embarrassment although it took her a moment to regain her composure.

"Regardless, I will still not marry you, or any man for that matter."

"Yes, you said as much."

"So there really is no reason for you to call on me, or seek me out," Evelyn pointed out.

"Oh but there is, sweetheart, since you've been such a little liar, it is my duty so see that you are not, in truth, lying about being blackmailed."

"Perhaps the blackmail was a bit too farfetched," she admitted.

"You still lied."

"As I already admitted, my lord."

A long silence ensued. His breath tickled her skin and she swore she could hear the steady beat of his heart through the loud music and chatter of guests as he regarded her with stern features. Her gaze lowered to his broad masculine chest, the scent of tobacco clinging to him, his muscled arms holding her a trifle closer than was proper. The music of the orchestra faded away as the smell of his scent and the feel of his arms at the small of her back took over her senses. Wait a minute. When had his hand moved to the small of her back?

She tried to ease back from him but his arm tightened. When she met his gaze, she found him watching her, his eyes filled with amusement, almost as if he knew exactly how his proximity affected her.

"I do not believe any other man will make you feel the way I do," he murmured in a hoarse voice.

"You cannot know that," Evelyn replied softly.

He chose to ignore her reply. "I do however believe you're up to no good and that you would do and say anything to hide the truth."

"And what would that be? The truth you speak of?" she asked, desperate to change the topic.

"I don't know what you are hiding Evelyn," he paused, "but I will find out and if there is any truth to your little story, there will be hell to pay."

Evelyn averted her gaze, knowing where this conversation was leading. It shouldn't come as a surprise. Her brother's calm over the

matter clearly indicated his confidence. Alliances between the men must have been formed. Well, let them form their rapsallion band of rogues.

She perceived them not to be a problem for her plan. However, it did present a problem for her. It pinched that her beloved brother chose the side of her adversary, but other than a stab of betrayal, she maintained her good spirits. Besides, Evelyn was confident she could out-smart both her brother and Matthew.

“Really my lord, I much prefer to hear about your secrets than talk about mine.”

“Matthew,” he bit out with a scowl. “Unlike you my dear, I don’t have any secrets.”

Ha! So it had finally come down to this. He would not part with the truth about his former lover’s reappearance. She mustn’t lose her temper, but it proved impossible. His double standards bordered on the outrageous and, quite frankly, intolerable. Her jaw set in determination. She wanted this done with, for good.

A feeling of desolation came at her as the finality of her decision hit her. Tilting her head down to avoid his gaze, she stared at his expertly tied cravat to gather her wits. He would see her momentary lapse as a victory. Once her wits were back in their rightful place she lifted her head.

“Everyone has secrets my lord, and everyone has their reasons for keeping them.”

“That is not reason enough to spout nonsense and then avoid me for a week.”

“I’ll concede to my exaggeration, but I have chosen not to confide in you or my brother. In regard to my avoiding you, I haven’t been avoiding you for just a week, if you’ve failed to notice, I have been avoiding you all Season and I am still avoiding you.”

“Believe me, sweetheart, nothing you do is beneath my notice. As for meeting a man in the gardens for a tryst, that is beneath you. You should have chosen a better lie.”

“True,” Evelyn admitted, eyes dropping to his cravat once more.

“Tell me what you are up to, Evelyn.”

Evelyn shook her head. He was so smug, so confident in his belief that she would surrender to him. Would he ever give up?

“Perhaps I told the truth in the form of lie so that you cannot see it for the truth it actually is.”

“You have an answer for everything, don’t you?” He tugged her closer, much closer than was appropriate. “You shouldn’t poke a lion, Evelyn. He might devour you.”

She tried to shove him back, but failed. “Release me at once,” she hissed. “This isn’t proper.”

“No, it is not. But that never bothered you before.”

Evelyn wanted to kick the arrogant beast. When he didn't allow an inch of distance between them she hissed again, “Release me. You will cause a scene.”

“I don't care.”

It dawned on her that he was being deliberate. “You're doing this on purpose.”

“Your powers of deduction are astonishing,” he said sarcastically, his mocking smile turning so wicked her heart skipped three beats.

“My lord—” she began.

“You never had a problem calling me by name before.” An edge entered his voice. “I see no reason for you to stop now.”

“That was before I knew what a beast you were.”

Matthew gave a throaty laugh, causing people to stare and take notice of their closeness.

“I've never hidden that fact while you, my dear, don't even have the decency to feel guilty for your little lies.”

“Because I did not do anything wrong!”

Well not entirely.

“Really? You don't think lying about being blackmailed was wrong?”

“I said do, not say and my intentions weren't at all bad.”

He bent his head close enough for his lips to brush her ear. “Tell me of these intentions then, Evelyn?”

She shivered in his arms. Good Lord. Why hadn't she realized it before? He was trying to seduce the information from her! He'd distracted her, quite effectively, while Simon and Damien were probably off spying on Jo and Belle. Then Evelyn noticed the whispers and looks of interest from the dancers closest to them. The beast. He was deliberately drawing attention to her. She would be the talk of the town if he did not cease this absurdity. Everyone would be keeping their eyes on them out of curiosity.

“Utterly devious till the end.”

“Careful sweetheart,” he whispered smugly. “Someone might overhear you. And what might they think then?”

“That you're truly the beast everyone thinks you are!”

“Or that you're hopelessly in love with me and can't bear the thought to be apart.”

Drat him for being the most brilliant, devious creature in existence.

“So this is how you mean to find out what I am supposedly hiding,” she observed after they'd taken another turn.

“Oh no sweetheart, I haven't even begun. This is how I mean to keep all eyes on you so that you stay out of trouble,” he murmured in a voice as silky as it was menacing.

She would have loved nothing more than to walk out of their dance but his grip tightened around her as he read her intentions. He had, for all intents and purposes, trapped her as nothing else could. Society would be abuzz to witness how their courtship would play out. But what he was unaware of, and while he believed she had fallen perfectly into his trap, he had in fact, fallen perfectly into hers. After the Carrington Ball no one would blame her for walking away from him, they would expect it, but more importantly, no one would notice the disappearance of Madeleine Loveday.

With sudden force the grip on her waist tightened and panic gripped her as she saw the French doors leading onto the balcony and registered his intent. His earlier determination still clear in her mind, it occurred to Evelyn that he'd attended the ball with this particular purpose in mind, and nothing would deter him.

"My lord, I must ask you to stop this at once," she whispered desperately, failing to slow them down. It was like trying to shove a mountain aside. He would have his way whether she liked it or not. Damn his arrogant hide! Two more turns brought them at the doors and he only released her long enough to open one, preventing her from making a run for it.

"There you go calling me 'my lord' again," he said, shoving her through the door and onto the balcony, ignoring the foul words she hissed at him.

"Let me go you stinking pig!" she hissed, yanking her hand free as she whirled and headed back toward the ballroom. With alarming speed he stepped between her and the door, shutting it with a resounding click.

"Come now Evelyn, you can't still be mad at me?" he whispered looming over her, his presence causing her heart to pound.

"What do you mean to do? Keep me out here until I tell you what you want to know?"

"The thought crossed my mind," he said as he began to unbutton his coat.

He smiled when she took a step back.

"What are you doing?" she croaked, hoping he did not think to seduce her out here.

At any moment someone could come through the door! His unrepentant grin took her off guard and she narrowed her eyes at his boyish look transformation. It would not sway her.

"You are shivering, Evelyn. I'm merely being a gentleman."

He draped his coat over her shoulders.

"Then let me go."

"When I finally have you all to myself? Never."

She tried to peer over his shoulder into the ballroom to see if Jo or

Belle lurked nearby to rescue her, but his height blocked her view. She had the impression that her friends were occupied by non-other than her brother and St. Aldwyn. They'd underestimated the men's determination. She cast a furtive glance around the balcony, thanking the stars no one else hung about.

"I have to congratulate you, my lord. You planned this well, though I doubt it was all you."

"The three of you are up to something," his grin faded abruptly. "You are playing a dangerous game, Evelyn."

Why of all the shameless, obnoxious—"I'm playing games? How dare you accuse me of playing games? Do you want to know why I was sneaking about, lying and avoiding you?" she practically shouted up at him, his confidence starting to fade at the hysterical note in her voice.

"I know all about your secret meetings with your former lover. I have heard the tales of you gallivanting across town but the most reprehensible part of it all, acting like I'm already a piece of your property. Well, I'm not!"

His face had lost all expression at her admission.

He advanced on her, his jaw tightening dangerously. "It's not what you think, Evelyn."

"It's not?" she asked incredulously, aware she had played this particular hand to soon but could not bring herself to care. "Do you know what I think? You have double standards. Every time I mention Damien you turn all stiff and territorial and anytime I'm in his company you behave like a caveman, but then you entertain Charlotte the Harlot at your residence!"

"It's not what you think," he bit out.

Evelyn snorted. "Of course it's not," she remarked snidely, her temper erupting. "You have manipulated me around every nook and crook since the day you arrived. I've been nothing but a pawn in your game of vengeance, so do not dare accuse me of playing dangerous games."

Matthew caught her around the waist, tugging her into a close embrace.

"Yes, I have seen her, but had you bothered to ask me I would have explained. But no, you avoid me and assume the worst."

He dragged her even closer against his chest, sarcasm heavily laced in his voice, "Is that what you are trying to do Evelyn, venturing into dangerous parts of town, making up stories about blackmailers and secret trysts to get my attention?"

"No, you cursed—"

He gave her no chance to finish the insult. He kissed her. It was so unexpected she was momentarily frozen before her wits came back

and she shoved at his chest. A kiss wasn't going to make everything right even if it did make her knees weak with desire. When he finally released her and stepped back she felt oddly hollow and cold. Yes, only this man could set fire to the blood in her veins one moment and freeze it the next.

"I see you have gone all stiff on me, Evelyn." His eyes smoldered as they passed over her body, coming back to rest on her face. "Have you nothing to say?"

She ignored the insult. The truth being she was too furious to say anything, furious for his manipulations and furious for allowing him to provoke her. How could he turn everything back to her? She hadn't been the one sneaking about with a former lover. And now he accused her of seeking attention and doing anything to get it. Tears threatened to cloud her vision.

"This has been nothing but a game to you."

"No," he whispered harshly.

"Well, I am not playing anymore. I have developed distaste for the games you play."

Matthew stiffened. "I don't play games."

Evelyn snorted. "Who is the one lying now?"

"I have never lied to you."

"Of course you have. The only difference between my lies and yours is I admit I lie and there is never any doubt that the reason I lie is because I do not want you to know the truth."

Matthew's face turned to stone at her revelation but she continued. "I wouldn't put it passed you to be deliberately seen in her presence to provoke me. Well it worked, my lord. Only not in the way you wanted it to work. It only made me more determined to stay as far away from you as I possibly can."

They stared at each other for what felt like a lifetime. He hard and immovable, she furious and determined. Nothing showed of his emotions. He would not give an inch.

Evelyn sighed disappointedly. "I would like to go back inside now."

"Evelyn—"

Desperate to hide her bewildering reaction to his assault on all her senses she said in flat, but hard tone, "We are done. Let me pass."

"We will never be done."

"Then we are at an impasse, I will never consent to be your wife and any further attempt to persuade me would be a waste of your time."

Matthew fought down the sudden panic that threatened to rise at her words. Her tone held finality. A string of curses filled his mind. This had not been his goal. Afraid the damage done might be permanent, and she might be slipping through his fingers, he took a

step back to give her space. She was right to believe he had manipulated the situation with Charlotte, deliberately not mentioning it, knowing she would hear the rumors. He would not regret it, either. Her reaction proved to him beyond a doubt that she felt something for him. He stared at her rigid form, snaked a hand through his already unruly hair before he stepped aside, giving her enough space to pass.

“This isn’t over Evelyn,” he murmured as she passed through the door, not even pausing at his admission. It will never be over.

“I will never give up,” he whispered into the cool night air. Evelyn might not believe it but using Charlotte as manipulation hadn’t been the only reason he’d used her. This confrontation with Evelyn was paramount for them to move to the next stage of their relationship. They could move forward and he could finally put the past behind him.

Chapter 16

Matthew couldn't sleep. Dreams of Evelyn plagued him. No, to say he was plagued by fears of Evelyn would be more accurate. She haunted him. She tortured him. He'd grown used to it, preferred it even. The alternative was unacceptable. He refused to be taunted any further by that fateful night six years ago when he'd found Charlotte in bed with his best friend.

Evelyn had replaced those nightmares. Thank God. Granted, with time the dreams eventually became fewer, but they never quite disappeared. He would still be plagued by nightmares some nights, especially when a storm raged outside, like the one warring on the inside. But even on those nights no nightmares came, the struggle for sleep to claim him remained. The first night he'd fallen asleep without any difficulty had been the night he met Evelyn Tremaine.

But Evelyn did not want him for a husband, even though he was quite certain she loved him. Or at least would if she gave him a chance. She was however attracted to him, of that he had no doubt. His male senses went on alert in her presence. The way her breath quickened when he touched her. Her dreamy expression whenever she studied him from beneath her long lashes, when she thought he didn't notice. So why did she not want him for a husband? Might it be because of Charlotte? Surely he could not be held accountable for that woman's stalking habits?

Matthew also found when he felt self-assured in his abilities to win Evelyn, he surrendered almost instantly to the darkness and sleep claimed him, but like tonight, at times of uncertainty, sleep was an elusive mistress. He glanced at the empty space beside him. He might try chains. That ought to keep her by his side.

Damn woman.

She'd brought peace to the turmoil raging inside him. She anchored him and gave him hope for something lost long ago. She was his revolving universe. Without her, his world could not exist. Did she not see that? Did she not feel the connection they shared? The current that tickled their senses whenever they neared each other, touched each other.

He'd seen a lot of dark things in his life, more than he cared to admit. But while past pain had always just been exactly that, pain, Evelyn soothed his hurts. Light now reflected where, for the past six years, only darkness had been his constant companion.

He recalled the first time they'd met, she stood in front of his bed and candlelight fell across her hair, giving her the most spectacular glow. He'd known instantly she would be his angel, guiding him back to a life worth living. It was, in fact, the exact moment he fell in love with her. Matthew remembered a curious shifting the region of his heart and then the room fading away until the only thing he saw was her aluminous glow.

"Heart sick fool," he grumbled into the darkness.

But when Evelyn smiled at him, in those rare unguarded moments when nothing held her back, her eyes sparkled. A glow of happiness surrounded her, lighting her face up like a million tiny little stars. And so she became his stars. His light. His beacon. Day or night; he walked constantly in her light.

He loved her.

They were meant to walk this earth together. Hell, even her trouble making nature and ridiculously wild imagination appealed to him.

And Matthew would not stop, he would always try to win her over and over and over until he conquered and peeled away every layer surrounding her. Then she would be with him, in his life, in his bed. He grinned at the image her in his bed brought to mind. No, there would not be much sleep.

He loved her.

But first he had to uncover the reason for her reluctance to wed him.

Charlotte and her incessant stalking proved a problem for him. Word of his return and interest in a young beautiful daughter of an Earl had reached her ears and now she hounded him relentlessly. He had been clear however, after she'd accosted him in his home and cornered him at the opera—she could go to the devil. He hadn't even attended the blasted opera, only passed it and was then waylaid by an old acquaintance. Though nothing existed between Charlotte and him, he had a gut awful suspicion that the Harlot deliberately stirred a pot of trouble for him.

All that aside, Matthew understood Evelyn abhorred men who

dictated the lives of women. She also knew of his domineering and absolute ways. She assumed, quite correctly, he would take over her life in a heartbeat and his Evelyn was never going to marry such a man.

Would he compromise? He would certainly try to. But he still needed to convince her that while life with him would never be easy, it would be worth it. He exhaled on a sigh. Though, it was hard to compromise when every word uttered from that pert little mouth appeared to be lies.

He got up and walked to the window, wishing he could feel her warmth against his body. Outside it was cold, like the icy chill of snow that sank deep into your bones. He hated the fear that took hold of him. It weighed him down like a big ship sinking into the ocean. He had thought himself to be invincible, but in this moment of icy fear he realized, for the first time since his pursuit started, he might not win. He may lose her.

Matthew let out a heart wrenching breath and wandered back to his bed, sitting on the edge, looking at the empty space next to the side he occupied and sighed again. He missed Evelyn. Every night without her became worse. If she walked away from him... it would be unbearable.

He laid back and directed his mind to what she was hiding. He recalled her sudden transformation and the secret admirer who'd mysteriously vanished. Her friends, Lady Belle and Lady Josephine. Their excursion into White Chapel and Evelyn's lies about blackmail. Her knowledge of Charlotte's return, followed by the lonely week of avoidance. Matthew still seethed at the thought of that blasted week.

Every damn thing circled back to those three women. And he had not forgotten how her friends had taken her away from him in Bath. And then there was their other friend, Viscount Weather-something, the prissy dandy, more concerned with the cut of his waistcoat than anything else. Or was he?

He sat up again.

Had they been so focused on keeping an eye on the women they forgot about the fourth musketeer? The musketeer always overlooked. The musketeer always lurking in the background. The musketeer never far behind.

He paused, testing his theory out in his mind. Viscount Weathercock. Well, hell.

Those devious creatures were smart. Viscount Weatherpie would most assuredly be an integral part of their plans. And they'd missed it entirely. He glanced over at the window, surprised to see the faint light of dawn starting to brighten the room. It was time for some investigation.

"They've been hounding us for days and then suddenly they stop."

It was enough to make Evelyn cease stirring her tea. "Who?" she asked, since the truth was, she hadn't been listening.

"Your brother and his two lap dogs."

Evelyn thought back to the past two days. It was true they'd backed down, but that didn't mean they weren't watching. Matthew's eyes were always there, piercing her back, yet he kept his distance.

She glanced at Belle and then at Jo, who were both nodding their heads in agreement. "I suppose you are right," Evelyn said, although she knew quite well that they were.

"Something is wrong," Jo muttered, staring at her tea.

Evelyn took a sip of hers. "Perhaps they have given up," she suggested with a shrug of her shoulders. In truth she did not care what they were up to, couldn't think of it even. Tonight was the big night, and the stage was set for her big performance. Well, at least set in her mind. Her nerves however, hung by a thread. And not the palm sweating nervousness, she might add, but the heart wrenching she wanted to die, nervousness.

"So," Evelyn said, picking up a slice of lemon cake, "I take it Simon and Damien have been persistent in their lurking?"

"Arrogant lurker," Belle responded.

"Exasperating lurker," Jo added. "And absolutely driving us insane."

Evelyn burst out laughing, pleased that she did not sail this ship alone.

"Your brother won't stop following me about," Belle admitted in disgust. "He's scaring away all my beaux with his lurking in the shadows."

Jo nodded. "St. Aldwyn is utterly insufferable," she complained. "He even follows me to the powder room, as if I wouldn't notice him lurking behind pillars and plants."

"At least Wes is not being followed," Evelyn put in with a small smile.

"Proving them to be a bunch of idiots," Belle said, causing them all to laugh.

"Not to mention," Jo turned to Evelyn, "that their lurking about is starting to cause murmurs of interest amongst the members of the ton. Even my brother has remarked upon it, demanding me to stay away from 'that defiled bastard'. His exact words."

"I cannot believe their nerve," Evelyn scoffed. This was getting out of hand. "But surely your brother doesn't think you are interested in Damien?" Evelyn paused, "Or are you?"

"Do not be absurd."

"Well then you have nothing to worry about," Evelyn replied, and

then with a sly smile said, "He's not that bad, you know." Which, it belatedly occurred to her, was perhaps why her friend had been acting so strange since their return from Bath.

"Would you stop!"

"He would make the perfect project you know," Belle suddenly said. "St. Aldwyn, the reformed rake."

"What?" Jo gaped.

"We can always put it to the test," Evelyn added with a brilliant smile.

Jo waved them off. "I have no interest in that man." Pausing, she glanced at her friends. "What do you mean put it to the test?"

"Well, to see how he would react when you flirt with another rake?" Evelyn provided.

When they only stared at her she continued, "I read it in one of my books and it seems like it might work. If he was interested, that is."

"Testing St. Aldwyn will never be a good idea," Jo admonished. "In fact, it has trouble written all over it. Besides, I'm not interested in him or marriage in general."

"It was worth a try," Belle put in somewhat disappointed.

Evelyn tilted her head. "What about Simon?" she asked Belle, who was suddenly very interested in her empty cup of tea.

"What about him?"

"You've been in his company for a week now; surely you know what I mean. And you do seem to provoke him," she waved her hand in front of her nose, "I have never seen him so out of sorts before."

"Good," Belle said satisfied. "It serves him right for hounding me."

"I daresay you are driving him to drink."

"Really?" Jo murmured with a sparkle in her eyes.

Belle shot her a warning look

Evelyn nodded. "He is even more frequently foxed than usual."

"Oh."

"It only stands to reason that you have rattled his feathers."

"Ruffled," Jo put in. "It's ruffled his feathers."

Evelyn gave Jo a deliberate glance. The word had been purposefully used. "I'm enjoying his bad moods, it makes me feel good."

"Evelyn!" Her friends said in unison, laughing.

"I for one have no interest in your brother or marriage," Belle said with a lift of her chin but continued, "Although I have no intention of staying virtuous for the rest of my life."

"Ye gods Belle, only you would put it like that."

Belle looked confused. "How else should I put it?"

"Oh I don't know," Jo mused. "How about, even though I have no interest in marriage I will not spend my life alone."

"That's just ridiculous."

“Well, if you are considering my brother as a candidate for an affair I would rather not know,” Evelyn said with a pull of her face.

“Your brother?” Belle laughed. “Heavens no! If I choose a lover it will be man passionate and full of fire. He would be not only handsome but will present a challenge. Your brother is no challenge at all.”

“Is that so?” A masculine voice answered.

All three women turned in their seats to find Westfield standing in the doorway, a fierce scowl on his face.

“Simon,” Evelyn said alarmed. “How long have you been standing there?”

His eyes never strayed from Belle as he answered, “Long enough to know that silly girls talk about silly things.”

Belle waved his comment aside with a flick of her hand, but Evelyn narrowed her eyes on her brother. Silly girls, silly woman phases. The man had no sense at all.

“I came to inform you I will be out for a while,” he said glancing at Evelyn briefly, before his gaze settled back on Belle.

“Very well,” she said uncertain at the tension in the air now. Then just as suddenly as he’d appeared, he turned and left.

“Well that was awkward,” Jo trailed off with eyes as big as saucers.

Belle snorted.

“Well,” Evelyn began, not certain what to say. “That will certainly put him in a foul mood for the rest of the evening.”

“Do you think he heard anything else?” Jo asked a touch alarmed.

Evelyn shook her head. No, he would not have been unable to resist a jibe, or leave for that matter.

“Are you sure it was wise to involve Wesley?” Belle asked Jo as she picked up a biscuit, seemingly unconcerned about her brother and his remark.

“I don’t see why not, no one would suspect him helping us,” Jo murmured and Evelyn knew instantly who she referred to as ‘no one.’

“It’s not a secret that we all are good friends,” Evelyn pointed out.

“The great Viscount Weatherly involved in illegal activities,” Jo snorted. “No one would believe it.”

“Whether they believe it or not, they would have to prove it first, which would be impossible.”

Evelyn glanced slightly toward her left, where, through the half open door, she heard her brother’s footsteps. Jo followed her direction, each one of them having gone silent at the voice of her brother. They waited until they heard the door slam in the distance, signaling his departure, before they started to speak again.

“We should be more careful of speaking freely,” Evelyn murmured.

“I agree,” Jo responded with a nod.

Belle nodded too.

They all knew what was at stake.

“But, they would have to catch us first,” Belle said smiling.

Jo chuckled.

Evelyn managed a chuckle of her own although she really didn't feel like laughing. She liked their optimism, but she didn't share it. She would like to cry, weep, sleep and never wake up. But that would never do. The men were so determined to find out what they were up to that they had been forced to meet at unholy hours of the morning in secret. One morning in particular, Evelyn had opened her door to find her brother sitting against the wall across from her bedroom, asleep. The secret meetings stopped. They were now only speaking in code to Wesley.

A slight ripple of something peculiar stirred in Evelyn's consciousness. A disorder of events, righting itself in her memory. Her breath caught in her throat and her eyes widened in shock and disbelief. As if observing a poorly acted scene at the opera, events unfolded in her mind.

The ridiculous wager of Lord Harry.

Her maid's sudden illness.

Her carriage breaking down.

Her footman's disappearance.

The shot that caused her horse to rear.

Damien's appearance.

Simon not calling her out on her actions.

The reunion of the three men.

Like a lightning bolt striking the top of a tree Evelyn was hit with absolute realization, leaving her breathless and shocked. It had all been planned, from the very beginning.

“Evelyn?” Jo said worriedly.

“Are you all right?” Belle asked, a frown marring her beautiful features.

Evelyn glanced at her friends, then at the burning sensation on her legs. She had dropped her tea onto her lap. She jumped up, patting wildly at the wet stain spreading across her skirts. Her gaze flickered to the concerned faces of her friends.

“They planned it all along.”

“Who planned what?” Belle asked.

“My brother and his two... the lot of them,” she whispered dazed.

Taking Evelyn's hand in hers, Jo asked, “What did they plan?”

“Everything.”

Belle frowned. “Wait, are you suggesting they are behind you

meeting Grey and being compromised?"

Jo shook her head. "They could not have known she'd be compromised, but they would have wagered on the outcome," Jo said, realization dawning.

Evelyn nodded. Yes, they could not have known whether she and Matthew would be attracted toward one another, but they had enough knowledge of both of them to take the chance. It was a grand diabolical plan, a plan that, if Evelyn hadn't been so preoccupied with Matthew, would have seen a mile away. It was also the reason the plan had worked so brilliantly, because by the time realization dawned, it was too late.

Betrayal pierced her like tiny daggers stabbing into her heart.

Evelyn suspected there was more to her realization than just the obvious, like the reason her brother felt the need to act so devious to get her a husband, plotting and scheming behind her back.

"Everything makes sense now," Evelyn whispered, looking down at her shaking hands. "Why Simon didn't explode when Brahm brought me back home, why he didn't act on anything I did."

"I can't believe they would stoop so low," Jo said as she slumped back in her chair.

"I can," Belle echoed.

"And I, the predictable Evelyn Tremaine, played into their hands like the fool I am, just as they must have expected I would."

Jo paused. She looked at Belle. "They could not have anticipated your attraction to Grey."

Evelyn shook her head. "They didn't need to. They planned the setting to perfection, their timing perfect."

"I remember that day," Belle put in, turning her head in thought. "It rained heavily."

"Yes," Jo nodded her agreement. "I remember thinking you were crazy to travel to Bath in that weather."

"That's my point," Evelyn interjected. "It was planned to perfection."

"Do you think Lord Grey was in on it?" Belle asked with a nervous glance at Evelyn, probably scared she would burst into tears. She certainly felt like she was about to crack open. Had Matthew known?

"I'm not certain, he seemed furious at the sight of Damien."

Jo glared at the door. "We ought to teach them a lesson," she said, disgusted at the entire male population.

"What a brilliant idea," Belle responded.

Evelyn paused, collecting her thoughts. Yes, they deserved to be taught a lesson. "How do you suppose we accomplish that?"

She was met with two sly smiles.

Belle leaned forward and looked around; as if afraid someone might

overhear her even though no one but them occupied the room. "You elope with Wesley."

"What?" Good heavens, not this again. "I can't marry Wesley."

This was met with loud chuckles, and Jo finally said, "It won't come to that. It only needs to look as though you've eloped with Wesley."

"It's perfect," Jo continued smiling. "Your brother and Grey will give chase and it will serve as a valuable lesson to the both of them."

Evelyn blinked, it might work. At the very least it would be fun. But it would accomplish nothing but a few hours of sport. They would still expect her to marry Matthew. It would be the final death blow to her freedom. Oh bother! Who was she kidding? Freedom was just a word she clung to. It had died with the introduction of the Earl into her life.

"And when is this elopement supposed to take place," Evelyn asked resigned.

"A few days after the speculation of Madeleine Loveday's disappearance has died down," Belle responded, rather confidently.

"The speculation is never going to die down," Evelyn contradicted.

Jo gave a slight nod. "No, but at least until the worst is over," she said, shooting Evelyn a huge smile. "This is going to be so much fun."

"Let us first survive the evening before we think about taking on the next big thing," Evelyn murmured.

"But are you going to be fine?" Belle pressed once more.

Evelyn honestly did not know. She did however know that it seemed less and less likely that her dreams to travel the world would not come true and more and more likely that she would wed Matthew. Her lack of surprise led her to believe that even while she fought hard to cling to her freedom, deep down she knew from the start she'd fought a losing battle.

"I'll be fine," Evelyn murmured, wondering if it were true.

Walter cleared his throat in the doorway. "Madam, there is a—"

A woman Evelyn did not recognize sailed passed him, interrupting his introduction. Tall and lean, she displayed an air of elegance and sophistication, but on closer inspection the beauty and gracefulness that would have held any man and envious woman captive, was ruined by the malicious tilt of her mouth and coldness of her gaze, reminding Evelyn of a bitter winter night.

Slowly Evelyn stood, her friends flowing suit.

Shrewd eyes raked over Evelyn, taking in everything from the wet tea stain on her skirts to the messy hair that was pinned loosely together on her head.

"You are the reason the Earl of Grey returned to society? You."

Evelyn stiffened. So this was the infamous Charlotte. Her eyes narrowed on her high forehead. Evelyn could tell this woman was used to intimidating women she deemed of lesser strength.

Evelyn wasn't one of those women.

"I am to take then you are the reason the Earl left society?" Evelyn shot back.

Charlotte looked taken aback, but only for a mere moment before true hatred shone in her too big eyes.

"What are you doing here?" Jo stepped in and asked scathingly.

Charlotte spared her friend only the briefest of glances, before sauntering further into the room, her eyes on Evelyn.

"Why, I wanted to meet the woman who has ensnared my Earl, of course."

"He's not your Earl," Jo remarked rudely.

Charlotte ignored her, her eyes never straying from Evelyn. "How did a plain, simple minded, boring little bookworm like you, captivate a man like that?"

Evelyn's temper sparked, but she managed to rein it in. She took a purposeful step closer, lifting the corner of her lips only slightly. She saw the flash of uncertainty enter Charlotte's eyes.

"I may be plain, but never will I be simple minded or boring."

Charlotte gave a mirthless laugh. "Ah yes, there's the spirit that would stir his interest. But let me be clear, girl, you will never have what it takes to keep him by your side."

"Neither did you."

Charlotte tilted her head. "What makes you think he has left my side?"

Evelyn's mask slipped and Charlotte's hawkish eyes did not miss it. She went in for the death blow.

"Where do you think I have been all this time while he was in the country," she licked her lips at the implication, "and why do you think I am here now?"

Evelyn paled. It was a lie. It had to be. Matthew would never betray her like that.

Charlotte's eyes glinted in pleasure. "It is true I had an affair, but make no mistake, he never left me, not in the way it matters."

Evelyn wanted to be sick. No, she wanted to scream and then be sick, however, she settled for a simple, "Get out."

The harlot's eyes widened at her forceful tone.

"Get out, or I will drag you out by your hair and kick you down the stairs myself."

The mental image brought a smile to her face.

"My, but aren't you feisty one," the harlot purred.

Belle and Jo took a step forward, straightening their shoulders, ready for battle.

The harlot lifted an elegant brow. "I shall go. I can see I am not welcome."

“You never were,” Evelyn said in a soft threatening voice.

Charlotte chuckled, but turned to leave, “I hope I will see you at the Carrington Ball, little girl. It is said to be a spectacular evening.”
With those parting words she left, and Evelyn sank down to the ground, numb.

Chapter 17

The Carrington Ball was a huge crush and Evelyn and her friends observed the splendor of the crowd beside their usual potted plant. They were keeping a watchful eye for the arrival of the Earl of Grey and his former paramour, Charlotte. Her limbs were still numb from their encounter earlier that day, but she refused to let that woman get the better of her.

"I have decided to stay behind," Belle whispered.

Evelyn and Jo whipped their heads her way.

"What?" Evelyn whispered back furiously, "We need you!"

"No, you don't, you've got this in hand," Belle replied, her voice barely audible above the orchestra playing.

Jo and Evelyn frowned at her.

Belle grabbed their hands. "Listen, if I stay behind I can help divert attention when Madeleine's father learns she's gone. I can help so suspicion does not fall on us. Besides, Lady Stockbridge will be attending with her lover in one of my gowns, while Lord Stockbridge is in attendance! I cannot miss that!"

"You're supposed to keep an eye on the men," Jo protested. "Much less be aware that Lady Stockbridge has a lover and find satisfaction in the whole disgraceful situation!"

Belle rubbed her hands together in glee. "Oh, as though you wouldn't like to see that old lecherous hound be made a fool."

"I pretend not to enjoy it."

"Look, I've got the situation well in hand," Belle explained patiently. "If you succeed in causing the most dramatic scene the ton has ever seen, then we won't have any difficulty."

Jo let out an exasperated breath. "You're impossible."

"I know."

"I haven't even met Lady Stockbridge yet," Evelyn cut in.

"Neither have I," Jo added.

"Don't look now, but lover beau is heading this way, quite determined I might add."

Evelyn looked at Belle. "Matthew is heading this way. He is here?"

"No," Belle said with a sly smile, "The other lover beau."

"Damn," Jo muttered. "What does St. Aldwyn want now?"

And then they noticed it. A sudden buzz that filled the entire ballroom, people stopping to gawk at a sight they couldn't see yet.

"Matthew?" Evelyn asked wide eyed.

Jo shook her head.

"Lady Stockbridge perhaps?" Evelyn asked, now curious.

"No," Belle whispered back.

"How do you know?" Jo asked.

"I have it on good authority she won't be arriving until later," Belle said, craning her neck to see what the fuss was all about.

"What authority?" Jo asked skeptically.

"The lady herself of course, she wants to make an entrance with her lover. Apparently she rekindled an old flame, and she plans to flaunt him tonight in front of her husband and make quite the scene."

"No doubt."

"She told you that?" Evelyn asked surprised.

"Well no, she told the seamstress who in turn told me. I've never met the woman."

"It's her," Evelyn said suddenly, "she's here."

"Lady Stockbridge?" Jo asked.

"No."

"Yes."

Evelyn and Belle said at the same time.

"Which is it?" Jo asked annoyed, not recognizing the woman lavishly dressed in one of Madam De La Frey's scandalous gowns.

"Charlotte."

"Lady Stockbridge."

They both said at the same time again, staring at each other in horror as the realization struck.

Charlotte was Lady Stockbridge.

Matthew was her old lover. Her new lover? Had Matthew always been her lover?

Her husband was in attendance. Evelyn was in attendance.

Evelyn clutched her stomach. This was going to be the scandal of the decade, the scandal of a lifetime.

"Oh. My," Belle said horrified with a few other expletives not fit for ladies ears. "I never once met Lady Stockbridge, I only recognized my gown."

Both Evelyn and Belle stared at Charlotte, Lady Stockbridge in utter horror. She sauntered through the crowd hanging on the arm of none other than the Earl of Grey, flaunting their obvious relationship. The buzzing of the crowd grew as ladies tittered behind their fans, stealing glancing in Evelyn's direction, some with pity and some with interest. By tomorrow word would have spread and she would be the talk of the town, gossip mongers relishing in her supposed humiliation.

And even though Evelyn had known Charlotte would be in attendance tonight, this was not how she imagined it would be. Deep down, she never truly believed Matthew would still be involved with the harpy, mostly because he had hounded her tirelessly, courting her. She had believed she would be immune to the sight of them together. Oh how wrong she had been! Her heart felt heavy in her chest.

Evelyn inhaled deeply and then exhaled slowly in a painful attempt to gather her wits. You love him, you dolt. Her inner voice reprimanded her. She loved him. But stubbornness had cast a shadow her own denial. What did it matter whether her dreams of traveling the world came true or not? If it did, would she not have bothered to act on her plans?

"I don't know if I can do this," she gasped out.

Through blurred vision she watched as Matthew stiffly searched the crowd of faces, but had yet to find hers.

Jo put her hand on Evelyn's arm. "There's no reason to stay, we need not do more than what they have already done."

She was right, Evelyn realized in dismay, her gaze flickering over their audience. Dozens of eyes that held nothing but unwanted pity waited for her hysterics, which she was expected to be overcome with at sight of Matthew in the arms of an old lover. Evelyn refused to look at the traitorous rogue. She expected such deviousness from Charlotte, but not from him. He had played her the fool.

"I'm so sorry, Ev," Belle said, reverting to a nickname she rarely used, her face as white as snow. "I had no idea."

"It's not your fault. I will be fine, please don't be sorry."

Maybe if she said it over and over she would believe it.

"I don't like this at all," Jo said. "Not one bit."

"You go," Belle said to Jo. "I'll stay to deal with this. No one would expect her to remain after this."

"It will cause an even bigger scene if she leaves now."

"Exactly."

"I'm standing right here," Evelyn muttered. Her heart was breaking.

"This is good," Belle said with a nod. "If you leave now not only will it cause a scene, it will give him the scare he so richly deserves."

"I will be ruined."

"You were ruined the moment you met him," Belle said with a

wink.

That was true.

“St. Aldwyn is almost on us, we need to leave now,” Jo said hurriedly, already dragging Evelyn to the door.

Where was Simon?

“Go, I’ll keep them here with my deadly stare,” Belle reassured them.

Evelyn appreciated Belle’s humor, but couldn’t bring herself to share it, or even smile. From across the room her gaze locked with Matthew’s and her heart hammered in her chest. For one brief moment the world narrowed on him. The tittering and music fading until she could only hear the sound of her heart beating wildly in her chest.

And then the woman on his arm laughed, bringing back with it all the tittering and music, and painful clarity. He was the cause of her pain, and he knew it. His expression remained blank, devoid of any emotion, but his eyes seemed to beg her for... something. She looked away before she embarrassed herself by bursting into tears. She was such an idiot!

Evelyn tried to remember everything she’d heard about Lady Stockbridge, but for the life of her she couldn’t remember anything, only that this was the woman who had, with vicious intent, broken up a friendship and caused the man she claimed as hers, to become a brooding recluse. Evelyn felt suffocated as horror seeped through her skin.

“You realize of course, there will be hell to pay if my brother catches us.”

Evelyn looked down at her costume with a skeptical eye. No one would believe they were maids. Worse, if her brother thought to comfort her after the Carrington Ball debacle he would notice she was gone. Not that she believed he would. He would wait until morning before he approached her. Like almost every male on earth he blanched at the sight of a woman’s emotions.

“There will be hell to pay if anyone catches us,” Jo commented wryly.

“Well, I for one will be leaving for my travels as soon as possible.”

“How convenient for you, I however don’t have the luxury.”

“Oh, hush,” Evelyn muttered, tiptoeing her way down another step. She surveyed their surroundings aware Jo followed right at her back. The wooden steps were narrow and steeper than the ones they used in the main hall. They could easily lose their footing if they rushed.

“I must admit I find it relaxing to creep around my home like a burglar robbing us blind,” Evelyn whispered as she reached the

bottom of the final round of stairs. "We should do this more often."

"Lord no," Jo muttered.

Evelyn glanced at her in amusement. "So dangerous parts of town and kidnapping members of the ton fall under your daily activities, but sneaking around a house creeps you out?"

"I never said I was perfect."

Evelyn chuckled. "At least the stairs don't creak."

"A small miracle I'm sure."

"Do you think Wes is waiting for us at the docks?"

"Saints, I hope so."

Evelyn hoped so to. They had a narrow time frame before Madeleine's disappearance would be noticed. She wondered whether Matthew would demand an audience with her. Her servants had strict orders to turn him away and if need be, shoot his knee caps.

But that's not why she was worried. Madeleine's father would realize she was missing at any moment. It was what made this endeavor so dangerous. What if Wes had been seen? What if they were caught? Evelyn stopped at the kitchen door to listen if anyone was inside. When they heard no one she opened the door and snuck through, exhaling the breath she'd been holding. Quietly they tiptoed to the door that led to the back entrance of the house.

"It's eerily quiet," Evelyn muttered.

Jo shuddered, silently agreeing with her friend. "I hate dark, quiet places, nothing ever good happens in them."

They finally reached the back entrance and slipped out into the crisp night air, both inhaling the fresh chill as though just escaping a prison.

"We made it," Evelyn whispered in relief.

"This wasn't the hard part."

An owl sounded in the distance, signaling for them. They ran down the street where James, the mountain, waited for them with an old worn out coach. He smiled as they neared him.

"Good evening ladies," he greeted as he looked passed Jo at Evelyn. "Lady Evelyn, always a pleasure to gaze upon your lovely face."

"Oh stop, you rogue," Evelyn replied, rewarding him with a charming smile.

"Yes, please stop," Jo said dryly. "Can we focus on the matter at hand? I needn't remind you we are on a time frame."

Evelyn chuckled as Jo marched past them and jumped into the awaiting coach. Excitement replaced the ache in her heart. Somewhat. If but for a small respite.

Evelyn winked at James and followed Jo. All appeared to be going according to plan. Perhaps too well according to plan? A faint stirring in her mind caused Evelyn a frown. What if everything had worked

out too well? She shoved those thoughts aside with a shake of her head. Everything would go as planned. It was why one made plans.

“Do you have the papers ready James?” Jo asked, breaking the silence that had ensued.

“Yes, my surly brother managed to pull it off in record time,” James replied patting his coat pocket, a smile playing across his face. “It irked him no end to be called away at this time in the operation.”

“I imagine it had to be urgent for him to depart so suddenly,” Jo responded.

“No doubt that it is.”

Evelyn regarded James in bemused fascination. He was a conundrum. In her observations she had come to learn that he and his brother were the exact opposite of each other even if they looked the exact same. And while she had never seen him without a smile or in a foul mood, there was an underlining edge to him, like a tiger waiting to pounce. Whereas his brother was all surly, as James put it, an underlining gentleness seemed to exist underneath his hard exterior.

“Finally,” Jo exclaimed as the coach came to a slow halt.

Evelyn crossed her fingers and sent a silent prayer that Wes had been successful and he and Madeleine were now waiting for them on the docks. She jumped from the carriage, following James and Jo into the night air. Here it wasn't so crisp and clean.

Studying her surroundings she saw no sign of Wes or Madeleine. Then two figures emerged from the shadows, and Evelyn breathed a sigh of relief. And wished she hadn't. Her nose wrinkled as the sharp tinge of smoke and rotten fish entered her nostrils.

Jo rushed to Madeleine. “Are you well?” she asked concerned, noting her slight limp.

Madeleine nodded. “Yes,” she replied in a tired voice. “Just a bit scared.”

“Everything is going to be fine,” James put in behind them.

Madeleine took a step back at the sight of James, a frown gathering on her forehead. Wes took note of her retreat and put a protective arm around her shoulders.

“Where's the boat?” Evelyn asked, her eyes squinting in search of the elusive boat.

Madeleine was to board a ship, anchored a few miles off shore. The exact location of the ship only the captain had knowledge of. It was safer that way, should Madeleine's father ever find out one of them had been involved in her disappearance, which he would most likely have noticed by now. But no one waited at the docks to receive them.

Poor Madeleine had suffered a great deal at the hands of her father. The last time he beat her so badly she hadn't been able walk for three weeks, it was then that Jo and her group came together to rescue the

dear.

"Late," Wes muttered.

"If the boat doesn't arrive in ten we move to plan B," James said with a steely edge to his voice. He wasn't a man for complications. "We dare not wait any longer or we risk being caught."

"I agree," Jo said with a nod. "It won't end well if we get caught now."

"My-y father would k-kill me," Madeleine stammered nervously, moving closer to Wes.

To all probing eyes it appeared she'd formed an attachment to their friend.

"Don't worry Maddy. I won't let anything happen to you," Wes reassured.

"I would like to wring that bastard's neck," James grumbled.

Evelyn wished that he would. In fact, she was tempted to do it herself. If only she had big arms like James. Madeleine's father, the Marquis of Marlborough, needed to be brought to justice for what he had done to his daughter. Unfortunately, no laws protected women against this kind of violence. The Marquis was her father and therefore her legal guardian; therefore she was his property to be done with as he pleased.

Evelyn was suddenly grateful for her brother who loved her beyond a doubt, even if he was at times too meddlesome for his own good. Madeleine had never known such love.

"What can be keeping them?" Evelyn said impatiently.

"They are sea folk, they don't give a damn about time," James said in a dark whisper.

"Or they are foxed," Wes grumbled, peering over the docks with a frown.

Jo sighed and started to pace. Her friend's frustration bled from her limbs.

"Something's wrong," Jo muttered absently.

Evelyn agreed. The ship's captain had been briefed on the importance and delicate nature of the situation, and the quick execution of it. Their operation would fail without his cooperation and they'd come too far to fail now.

"I don't normally say this but I have an increasingly bad feeling."

Everyone nodded in agreement. In all honesty, things had gone too smoothly. From the moment they'd arrived at the ball, the perfect reaction when Charlotte arrived on Matthew's arm and her humiliating departure. He hadn't even made a move to extract himself from her person. Evelyn blinked away that disturbing image. She was furious with him. Still, their plan proceeded with perfect precision, flawless even. Jo and James had planned this operation like army

generals, but where was the gunfire of the enemies?

Evelyn turned to Madeleine, "Are you nervous?"

"About starting a new life?"

Evelyn nodded.

"A little. But mostly I'm excited not to be scared all the time."

Evelyn's throat closed up at her admission. How could one's parents be so cruel?

Jo smiled sympathetically, pushing a lock of Madeleine's wavy blond hair out of her eyes.

"You'll do fine. You've got the kind of strength in you that will allow you to rise above any circumstance. I admire that in you."

"Careful Jo," Evelyn murmured. "You are revealing your old age."

"What?" Jo exclaimed in mock horror, lifting the mood a bit.

Evelyn and James chuckled softly. Even Madeleine had a small smile on her lips. Wes was the only one holding a serious demeanor.

The sudden sound of sloshing had them all frozen, listening intently and focused on the darkness beyond the docks. James cursed when they couldn't see anything but darkness before them.

"Did you hear that?" Wes asked in a whisper, gripping Madeleine's arm.

"I think everyone heard that," James muttered, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

"Be quiet," Jo admonished.

Everyone went quiet again, but no sound was detected other than the rippling of water.

Wes pulled Madeleine back into the shadows, but not before he leaned down to whisper into Evelyn's ear, "I hope you enjoyed my gifts, early wedding presents, if you will."

With that they both faded into the darkness of the surrounding buildings.

Evelyn watched them disappear with huge eyes. He had been her secret admirer? Goodness! Why ever would he do that? Had he wanted her to marry Matthew? She shook her head; she would dwell on that shocking revelation later.

The sloshing sound returned, diverting her attention, and James grabbed her by the shoulders when she would have taken a step toward the edge of the dock to better see what the noise might be. It would be disastrous should anyone other than who they were expecting.

"There is someone out there," James's voiced whipped through the night, pushing them aside to stand in front of them, shielding them from whoever lurked out there.

"I take it it's not the captains men?" Evelyn asked in a whisper, gripping the back of his coat her hands.

“No.”

For the first time since they met Evelyn saw James in all his deadliness. It defied explanation how he transformed from charming to scary so fast.

Unfamiliar sounds drew Evelyn's attention to the darkness again. Feet landing somewhere on the docks reached their ears. About three or four pairs, if her ears did not deceive her. Evelyn peered around James when he blocked her view. Tiny ripples of shivers racked her body when four big men emerge from the darkness.

Her heart plummeted. Her pulse began to race.

Fear had her clinging tighter to James. She turned to glance at Jo. Like Evelyn she stood frozen at the sight before her, sheer disbelief and shock playing across her features. Evelyn turned her gaze back to the four men approaching, their features now very distinguishable. Well, at least it wasn't the Marquis of Marlborough. That was something she supposed.

“I take it you both know these lads,” James said in a loud voice.

For the benefit of the approaching men, Evelyn assumed. His voice held just the right amount of indifference and she could tell the word “lads” had been deliberate. It had the desired effect on the men.

“I vote we beat him to a bloody pulp,” Damien said scathingly.

“Bloody hell, he's a mountain,” Simon put in.

“I've taken on bigger,” Damien growled, assessing James.

“I've taken on more,” James shot back, a sly smile plastered on his face.

The other two men remained silent.

Holy stars. “What are you doing here Simon?” Evelyn asked in a clipped tone. A mistake. She regretted her question at once when all eyes turned on her with narrowed regard. She knew very well what the men were doing here.

Matthew however didn't need to turn his gaze her way. His eyes had been locked on her since their arrival. A brief glance confirmed his gaze was not on her, but rather on her hand that gripped James's coat. Mentally Evelyn commanded her fingers to release its hold on the coat, but her fingers only tightened. Her grip on James's coat signified solidity where the ground had just opened beneath her.

Evelyn felt a pang of sorrow. Deep regret filled her. But anger soon sparked beneath the depth of regret. Had he not, only hours ago, been in the arms of the harlot? Well, he could stare all he wanted to, she would not let go of this coat!

His obvious glare also hadn't escaped James's notice.

“Well, we couldn't miss your little party now, could we,” Simon finally said, glancing at their surroundings.

“Captain Jack was very forthcoming with information of how he

was to escort a posh young lady to some unknown destination where she would start a new life, with a new identity. Care to elaborate on that?"

"No."

Was all Evelyn said.

"Defiant until the bitter end," Damien muttered.

"It would appear so," Simon agreed. "Where is the sweet Lady Madeleine?"

Evelyn shot Jo a sideways glance. They knew. The pretense was over. "I believe she left."

"With your good friend Lord Weatherpee, no doubt."

Evelyn narrowed her eyes on her brother. "No doubt."

"Evelyn," Matthew started, taking a step forward.

Apparently the sight of her clutching another man's coat with no intention of letting go was enough to bring him out of his brooding silence. Brahm, Jo's brother, however, remained stoic and silent. How out of character for him, Evelyn mused.

"I have nothing to say to you," she said to Matthew, her eyes cold and her voice curt.

He froze, watching her wearily.

"I take it," Jo spoke for the first time, directly to her brother, "you had your minions follow us around."

"On the contrary my dear," Brahm told her in a remarkably calm voice, "after St. Aldwyn, Westfield and Grey informed me of their suspicions, we had our minions follow your good friend, Lord Wetterby around."

Damien shifted on his feet. "It was clear you tried to distract us from something, while someone had to be making the arrangements. It seemed a logical deduction."

Logical indeed. Their mistake was apparent.

"It changes nothing," Jo spat at Damien.

"It changes everything," Brahm said.

Jo snorted. "You've learned our secret true, but it changes nothing."

"You will escort Lady Madeleine back to her father," Simon said with a voice that brooked no argument.

James' muscles bunched. He did not like being told what to do. "There is just one problem with that plan, lad."

"And what is that?" Simon asked, clenching his fists.

"The little lady isn't here."

"Where is she?" Brahm bit out.

"That's the best part," James replied with a smile, "We don't know."

"How can you not know?" Simon asked with suspicion.

Damien narrowed his eyes on all of them. "Willfully ignorant, I believe they call it. They cannot tell us where she is because Wheatby

never told them.”

“What the hell were you thinking, Evelyn,” Simon snapped, “consorting with people such as this,” he glared at James, “to destroy other people’s lives.”

Evelyn’s temper exploded. “Destroy Simon?”

She marched passed James toward her brother, poking at his chest. The coat forgotten. “We are not destroying Madeleine’s life. We are saving it. Her loving father beats her so frequently she’s limped for the better part of her life. Or have you never noticed how she’s never present balls, and when she does make an appearance, she never dances. That is because she can’t,” Evelyn paused to glance at the rest of them. “He has betrothed her to a slime ball that tried to force himself on her. If it hadn’t been for James,” she said pointing in James’s direction, “and the people I consort with, he would have succeeded.”

“You are not supposed to run around saving people. That is why we have Scotland Yard.”

“What would they have done, Simon? They would have informed her father who would have beaten her for it,” she said, incredulously, not believing he could be so naïve. “Or haven’t you heard, we *silly women* have no rights, we only have silly woman *phases*.”

He flinched at his own words being tossed back at him. “It’s still not your problem,” he bit out.

“It’s everyone’s problem!” she shouted, pushing at Matthew when took a step between her and her brother. “What else are we supposed to do?”

“You could have come to me about it.”

Evelyn burst out laughing.

“You? What would you have done? Hatched some plot to manipulate her father to stop beating his daughter?”

“What the devil are you talking about?” Simon asked scowling, while Damien shook his head reverently. Her brother did not catch the telling note in her voice.

“I’m talking about,” she paused, her gaze flickering between Damien and Simon, “how you two manipulated me into fleeing to Bath, where my maid then conveniently got sick and our carriage conveniently broke down. My footman conveniently disappeared and I conveniently got my room mixed up. But let us not forget the most convenient part of all, my introduction to your dear estranged friend, the Earl of Grey, who you have now, in light our so called courtship, conveniently renewed your friendship with.”

Silence greeted her assertion. Two guilty faces stared back at her. No wonder St. Aldwyn never told Simon anything. Her brother already knew everything.

“Ah yes and don’t forget Damien’s visit to Bath,” she glanced at the rogue. “Impeccable timing, I daresay.”

Evelyn felt rather that saw Matthew stiffen at her accusation. “What the hell are you talking about?”

She raked a scathing glare over him. “And you, my dear Lord Grey. Your pursuit has been relentless, to say the least. A good act, I must admit, you playing the indignant lover, betrayed by his love.”

“Evelyn—”

She held up her hand. “Do not dare deny it,” she said gesturing between her brother and Damien. “Your lover called on me yesterday. She told me quite the tale.”

His surprise was evident. “There is nothing between that woman and me.”

“Aren’t we getting off topic here?” Brahm asked cautiously, aware of the volatile tension surging the air.

“It was just getting interesting,” James chuckled.

Evelyn looked away.

Matthew stared at her in silent contemplation before he turned his attention to her brother. “What is she talking about?”

It was Damien who answered. “Perhaps we should take this conversation back to the privacy of your home?” he suggested to Simon, avoiding Matthew’s question.

Matthew seethed. He hadn’t even been this furious upon finding them at the docks. Not surprising, considering he already knew they were up to something, but had let it go because he’d been the one the one who entered the ballroom with his former love on this arm.

His scowl returned with a vengeance as his gaze rested on Simon. “You will tell me now.”

Not surprisingly, everybody froze.

“And I want to know,” he said his voice soft and laced with steel, “who was involved.”

Evelyn straightened at his tone. He hadn’t known? Or was this, once again, some ploy at manipulation? If not, it didn’t bode well for Simon or Damien. She took a step back, glancing at the group uncertainly. “Perhaps we should discuss this in a more private setting.”

“Good idea,” Brahm put in. “Josephine and I have things to discuss as well.”

He held out his hand to Jo, but she glided past him instead. “I’m not a child, Brahm.”

He snorted, stomping after her as she made her way to a carriage that had pulled up only moments ago. James too, disappeared into the shadows, and just like that, their adventure at the docks was forgotten and the deception of her brother loomed over them like dark clouds.

Another carriage came into view and Evelyn marched toward it,

leaving the men behind without a backward glance.

“Where are you going?” Matthew asked, reaching her in two strides.

“Home.”

“You are confined to your room, by the by,” Simon shouted after her, moving to follow.

Damn men and their simple minded reasoning. His simple minded rambling did not warrant a reply.

She started as Matthew’s hand settled at the small of her back. Her heart jumped at his touch. Probably afraid she might run away, Evelyn thought moodily. Little did he know, she planned to do just that.

Chapter 18

Once again Evelyn sat in her brother's study, her supposed place of solitude. And once again, narrowed eyes stared at her, each expression different from the other. There was her brother, who by any definition of the word brother, had every right to be angry at her for her latest adventure, yet he seemed pensive and wary, a sure sign that the tables had turned.

There was his good friend Damien, who by any definition of the word friend, had no reason to be involved in family affairs. He appeared curious and amused, a sure sign he'd been part of the plot to ruin her. And that brought her the heart of the matter, Matthew, her brooding Earl.

He was absolutely furious.

She could not blame him. They had both been manipulated by her brother and his partner in crime, people she trusted. A sigh escaped her parted lips. She was just as guilty for manipulating situations that suited her. He had every right to be furious at her too.

Even so, the image of Charlotte still haunted her, and with it uncertainty and anger. And Evelyn was tired of being uncertain. Her heart ached, she was exhausted and anger churned inside her. She could not stay and marry Matthew. Not under such heavy uncertainty.

It was painful to admit—she loved him. And he loved someone else.

It was why she was going to do something ridiculously stupid.

She was going run away.

“So,” Simon said, breaking the silence. “How did you learn the truth?”

He darted a cautious glance to Matthew, who glared at him, rage pouring through his body like lava.

Evelyn on the other hand regarded her brother steadily. She should

be just as furious, but in her heart, she knew her brother had meant well. He had concocted a hair brained scheme out of love.

In some ways they were much alike. They both possessed imaginations that would put a child to shame. In the end, she couldn't stay mad at him, for he only wanted the best for her and if he hadn't plotted and schemed, he would not have renewed a friendship that obviously meant much to him. Although, it remained uncertain whether her brother plotted to get her married or renew a friendship. That still didn't mean she would let him off the hook so easily. Besides, one could argue the fact that she'd behaved rashly and according to him, out of character, because of his grand plan he'd put motion.

"I revisited every unfortunate circumstance and it came together after that," Evelyn said finally, glancing between Simon and Damien. "But it was Damien and his presence in Bath that finally tipped the scales of realization."

They exchanged a pointed glance. She crossed her arms over her chest.

"It should have given away your entire plan, but you knew that if things went according to your plan, I wouldn't suspect anything." There was no mistaking the hurt in her voice.

Matthew came to stand beside her.

"That and my maid confirmed she was paid by a stranger to become sick at a certain point of my journey."

"So it's true," Matthew bit out, staring at Simon. "You manipulated us."

Simon shifted nervously. "We only planned for you to meet," he admitted wearily. "The rest was all you."

"Why?" Evelyn asked her brother.

Simon sighed. "Because you were so determined to spend your life alone, planning to run off and explore godforsaken Africa. Even after you met Grey, you were still determined not to be bullied into marriage, leaving me to believe your plans haven't changed."

"My plans remain the same," Evelyn muttered, aware Matthew's eyes pierced her with intense scrutiny. "You were aware of them?"

"I'm your brother Evelyn, I'm aware of everything concerning you."

Evelyn stilled. Everything? His tone of voice suggested he knew far more than she imagined he did.

"You know?" Horror seeped into her veins.

"No! Well that is to say," he spared a brief glance at a very stiff Matthew. "I did not... that is... not until Grey filled me in on details... of your... *thing*. But I never spied on you! Well, at least not very closely."

"What?" Evelyn exclaimed, turning to Matthew. "You said—"

"I never said anything Evelyn," Matthew interrupted steadily. "You assumed I would not give the details to your brother, I just never corrected your assumption."

The impact of his words hit Evelyn with a blinding force. "Never corrected my assumption? You lied to me," she accused, shocked at both her brother and Matthew's revelation.

"I never lied to you."

"You might not have lied to me out right, but you omitted a very important detail of our acquaintance. Omission is just another form of lying, especially when you are doing it deliberately."

"And you Evelyn?" Matthew asked, advancing on her. "You've been running around London lying through your teeth to everyone who loves you."

"Throwing stones are you?" Evelyn shot back. "Or did you forget Lady Stocknose clinging to your arm, flaunting your relationship? Yet another one of your lies. I lied yes, but I have been honest about them. I admit I lie."

"There is no relationship between that woman and me!" Matthew roared.

Evelyn's temper exploded. "Then how is it, she came to hang upon your arm tonight? Am I to believe you did not escort that harpy? Your actions, my dear Lord Grey, speak louder than your words," she hissed back at him, holding out her hand to stop him when he would have denied her claims. "You would never be caught in something as distasteful as a lie. So you decided not to inform me because it suited your purpose and I'm of no consequence beyond your own purposes."

He said nothing, only clenched his jaw.

Evelyn stared at him incredulous. "I see."

"Everything you do is of consequence to me," Matthew bit out.

Evelyn shook her head. "But not the other way around?" she asked snipingly. "You are a man. A lord. An Earl. You own every right to do as you like without consequence."

"That is not what I said," Matthew bit out. His eyes glittered dangerously as they narrowed on her.

"You might not have said it, but I see clearly enough."

"I don't need to explain my actions to you."

Evelyn stopped short at those venomous words. All else faded until there nothing but her and Matthew, and those words hanging above them. Utterly devastating words.

It was as though her whole life, her entire belief of equality and all she ever loved became hauntingly clear in light of those words. Hard words. True words. He didn't need to explain anything to her.

"You are right, as always, my lord," she said in a flat voice, determined not to let him see how his words affected her. "You don't

need to explain anything to me. We are of no consequence to each other.”

She turned her head toward her brother and his traitorous friend, cutting Matthew off when he would have spoken. “While I feel hurt and betrayed by your manipulations, I can appreciate the motive behind your actions. I therefore forgive you. I do not however, feel the need to explain my actions of the past week since they are self-explanatory. If you feel you need to punish me for them, I will accept the consequences gladly. I do however apologize for lying to you.”

Evelyn could see Simon wanted to argue, but he forced himself to only nod.

“Furthermore, I will not marry, regardless of the circumstances.”

Evelyn’s lips twitched at the protests gathering their eyes and continued, “I see no reason to attach myself to a man I would never be happy with. You will have to be content with your renewed friendship as the outcome of your plan; I however will not be party to it.”

The silence in the room was about as deafening as a roaring crowd but Evelyn forged on, determined to get everything off her chest.

“Regarding the matter of Lady Madeleine Loveday, it is done and cannot be undone.”

That was all she had to say on the matter.

Damien was the first to speak. “You are aware that there is a chance that Lady Madeleine’s father may learn of your involvement in the disappearance of his daughter.”

“Lady Madeleine did not disappear. I suspect she will return to London in a few days, whole and hearty. As to your concerns, her father will never find out what transpired and even if he did, it is a moot point now.”

“But we heard what you said on the docks,” Simon muttered with a frown.

“Eavesdropping is never a good thing Simon, regardless of what we said, we always had a follow up plan.”

Damien frowned, glancing at Simon. “I guess they outsmarted us after all.”

Simon nodded.

“Evelyn, may we please speak privately for a moment,” Matthew cut in stiffly, looking pointedly at Simon.

Evelyn refused to look his way. “We have nothing further to discuss, my lord.”

“I disagree. We have much we need to discuss.”

Evelyn shot a glare at her brother. “Do not dare to leave me alone with this brute.”

Simon sighed. “Perhaps it is best to settle matters between you. There seems to be some sort of misunderstanding.”

"There is no misunderstanding, just as there is nothing to settle."

"Evelyn please," Simon pleaded. "Hear the man out. If you still don't want to reconcile your differences after that, I will respect your wishes."

Evelyn regarded her brother intently. He meant every word.

"Very well," she conceded. He may have faith in the Earl's ability to procure her, she did not.

Damien came to stand beside her. "I apologize for my part in our little scheme," he drawled, not looking sincere at all. "But I do not regret any of it."

At least he was honest. Evelyn accepted his apology with a nod.

"Wait!" she said just as they reached the door. "What of the mystery admirer?"

Both Simon and Damien frowned. "We tried to determine who he was, but couldn't."

Good.

She suppressed a small smile. They didn't deserve to have their curiosity appeased.

Matthew shifted before her.

She sighed, steeling herself for the battle that lay ahead.

"You need to stop," he whispered savagely. "Stop resisting me, you, us," he gestured with his hands.

Say you love me, not her, and I will stop.

The unspoken words hovered between them.

"No, you need to stop insisting on this match. I will not marry you just because you compromised me."

"What do you want from me?"

Evelyn's heart broke at the defeat in his voice.

"You are incapable of giving me what I want," Evelyn admitted, her voice sad. "If we were to marry where would we live?"

"My country estate."

"Why not here?"

He let out a frustrating breath. "Because I can't stand this place."

"My friends are here. Do you expect me to adjust my entire life to match yours?"

"Would that so bad?" Matthew asked.

"It would be when I'm the only one who has to compromise."

"It's not like I'm locking you in a dungeon. You may visit your friends." He wasn't about to let her out of the bedroom long enough to visit any place.

"And would they be allowed to visit us?"

"Naturally."

"Wesley as well?" Evelyn asked with narrowed eyes.

"I don't see why he would want to."

Evelyn threw her hands up in the air in exasperation. "We're not even married yet and you're already dictating who I may or may not befriend."

"Not yet? So you agree that we are getting married."

"No! I only mean to say you would control my entire life, every decision I make would be weighed by you and if you find it lacking I'd be overruled. I refuse to live that way. I value my freedom too much to hand control of it over to someone else, even if that someone is you."

"You can make your own decisions, Evelyn. If you want to be friends with Weatherface, by all means, I will welcome him into our home."

Evelyn paced away from him, brushing her hands over her arms. "It's not only that. All my friends are here. I like the crowded streets, the crowded ballrooms. I want to travel the world, get into trouble, go on adventures and live an extraordinary life."

Matthew clenched his teeth. "And I would stand in your way of getting into trouble? I can't allow you to run around getting into dangerous situations with dangerous people?"

"That is not what I said."

Matthew grabbed her shoulders, shaking her. "No, but it's what you meant. I can't let you wander off into dangerous situations. Surely you can see that. If anything happens to you I would never be able to live with myself."

"And you don't trust me to determine what might pose danger and what might not?"

Matthew gave her a level stare, reminding her of the places she recently chosen to roam about. Fine, he had her there.

"And what of your lover?" It hurt to say her name.

"She is not my lover," Matthew growled, letting go of her in disgust. "Why do you persist on the matter? I do not want her nor do I desire her. If she ever comes near me or you again I would personally break her neck in two."

Evelyn blinked at that visual.

"But tonight..." Evelyn trailed off.

"She accosted me, so we were announced together. I would have cut her off, but I decided on a fate far worse. I apologize that it hurt you, but informing her husband of her troublemaking was the best way to ensure her immediate departure from our lives." He raked a hand through his hair, and continued, "Her husband refused to believe she'd dare cuckold him, so I showed him what an adulterous bitch his wife was."

Hope bloomed in Evelyn's heart. But lasted only for a moment. He would still drag her away from her life and her friends.

"I believe you," Evelyn said finally. "But it doesn't change what is. I am sorry, I cannot marry you."

Matthew stood frozen, staring at her blankly, then picked up a pot of ink from the desk and threw it across the room.

"We are getting married Evelyn, even if I have to drag you by your hair, we will get married. I refuse to accept your ridiculous excuse for declining my offer."

Evelyn stared at the ink, dripping from the wall, surprised. Then his words hit her.

"Ridiculous?" Ridiculous?" she snapped angrily. "I hardly think my refusing your offer should be labeled as ridiculous. I prefer the word smart."

Matthew shot her a dark look, his frustration mounting with her continued refusal. What would it take to convince her to accept him? He had to break through her reservations but she wouldn't let him, no matter how hard he tried. From the moment they met, he had fought a battle that would never be won. What a fool he was!

"It is clear then, I have wasted my time. Perhaps it is time for me to leave. "

Evelyn wanted to shout out in protest, but remained silent. The total acceptance in his voice broke her heart, but she couldn't bring herself to hand over her control.

"I realize that while I will never be truly free to do as I please, I don't want lose control of my life. I just can't give that up."

Matthew took her hand in his. "Evelyn, you won't be giving up control, you will only be sharing it with me, while I in return will be sharing mine with you."

Evelyn took her hand back, it wasn't that easy, and he knew it.

"So if I forbid you to be friends with Simon you would listen? Would you stop being friends with him or would you just continue with your friendship behind my back."

Matthew sighed. "Will you continue to be friends with Weaselby behind mine?"

"Yes, I would."

"So you would defy me?"

Evelyn's gaze locked with him. "I would defy you to the bitter end, if I thought you were being unreasonable."

"You do not trust me."

Evelyn looked surprised. Did she trust him? Yes. She trusted him with her life, but she did not trust him with—what? She couldn't think of what precisely what at the moment. Not with him so close to her.

"Why do you not trust me? Have I ever given you a reason to distrust me?" he pressed.

Evelyn turned away from him, but then turned back, her long lashes

lifting to lock with his. He'd never given her any reason not to trust him. She on the other hand, had lied, deceived and gave him every reason not to trust her. Wild lies and distorted truths aside, her desire for adventure blinded her to the truth and depth of love she felt for him. And now it was too late.

She looked away. "I made my decision never to marry a long time ago," she whispered.

"People are allowed to change their minds."

Evelyn nodded in agreement. "I won't."

"Dammit Evelyn!" Matthew shouted. "What do you want from me?"

He raked his hands through his hair, frustration etched into the hard lines of his face. "Do you care for me at all, Evelyn? I know you are attracted to me." He wanted to shake her, take her into his arms and kiss her senseless.

"Don't," she said holding up her hand for him to stop. Matthew grabbed her hand and pulled her closer, his body inches away from her.

"I can make you admit that you care for me Evelyn," he whispered in her ear, his lips caressing the side of her neck.

"I know," she whispered, leaning into him, inhaling his scent. "Don't."

"Why Evelyn? Why do you keep resisting me when I know you don't want to?"

Evelyn shoved at him and he released her, taking a step back he regarded her through hooded eyes. She needed more time.

"Please just leave me tonight. We can talk after breakfast; I just need some time to think. I can't think when you are near me."

"You shouldn't think at all," he muttered. "Bad things happen when you start thinking."

"Please," she pleaded.

Matthew had her in his arms in a second, his lips descending on hers in a harsh kiss. Evelyn shuddered in his embrace, not resisting his effort to claim her mouth. She needed to feel his lips on hers as much as he did. He groaned into her mouth, pressing his body tighter into hers. He wanted to push her against the wall, rip her dress from her body and plunge into her depth. He wanted to be lost in her but restrained himself, although it was hard, knowing she wouldn't resist him now.

He would give her this one night. But tomorrow, no force on this earth would stop him from claiming her. He refused to lose this battle. He refused to lose her.

He lifted his gaze to her as he ended the kiss.

"Only until tomorrow Evelyn," he whispered huskily, kissing her again briefly before letting her go.

“Only until tomorrow,” she whispered back, committing his face to memory, knowing after tonight she might never see him again.

Chapter 19

The next day the force came in the form of James Shaw. Westfield studied his old friend as Matthew paced up and down in front of his desk. He looked like hell. What the devil was wrong with Evelyn? She refused to marry for any reason, even when she found a man who loved her, and then she runs away with another man.

“She loves you.” A voice drawled from the doorway.

Both men turned to see Damien leaning against the doorway, his usual air of arrogance and devil-may-care evident in his lazy smile.

Matthew stiffened at the words.

“What do you know of love?” he spat.

“I know that if love was of no consequence, a woman wouldn’t run away with a stranger she barely knows, I might add, when all she could do was,” he paused, “marry you. No my friend, a woman only does that if she believes you not to return her affections and that you will exile her to the country, which brings us back to my point. By some miraculous turn of the tide, she fell in love with you.”

“Exile? I would never exile her and whether she believes that or not, why run away?”

“Why do woman, do what they do, if not to frustrate the male population, keeping us on our toes?” Damien remarked with a wry smile. “Evelyn is a romantic. She compares and idealizes what she reads in those dreadful novels. Did you perhaps sweep her off her feet, fight a dragon, jumped off a cliff or confess your undying love?”

Matthew snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

He wanted to throttle the arrogant bastard.

But no matter how infuriating he was, he was still bloody right. If Evelyn held onto the belief he would exile her she would run to the ends of the earth (which she evidently wanted to do anyway) to avoid

such a fate. And while he'd been aware of her fears to a degree, he never considered the extent she would go to avoid it. Why hadn't he seen it before? Of course it had never been his intention to exile her, not really, but his country estate was his home.

Yet he could see how living in the country did not seem attractive compared to the adventures of traveling to the wilds of Africa and living an extraordinary life, which was what Evelyn, desired above all things. Was he enough? There was that blasted question again, rearing its head.

She loved him. He had to be enough. It would be just like Evelyn not to notice when she finally found her extraordinary ending. Granted he was no fairy tale prince, but he loved her to a point of insanity. He'd just never told her that. Fool! The question now was, could he give up his life to give her hers?

Of course he could.

He loved her.

He would do anything to keep her.

Damn James Shaw to everlasting hell. With his actions this day he had made an enemy out of Grey and while the bastard may be big, he did not scare Matthew.

He was going to strangle Evelyn.

No.

He was going to kill the mountain first and then strangle Evelyn.

Then he was going to marry her.

Then he was going to make love to her.

Then they were going to live happily blasted adventurous after. He refused to let it turn out any other way than what he set his mind to. He should have told her he loved her. But fear had kept him silent and now he paid the price. But he wasn't the only one who was going to pay.

James Shaw.

It had taken all of his strength not to rip the man's heart out when Evelyn clutched at him like he was her lifeline. It hadn't been a good feeling, being jealous. He absolutely despised it. Yet he couldn't help its spread through his blood like raging fire, causing him to act like—he sighed—an ass.

The only reason he hadn't mentioned Shaw the previous night was because he sensed it would only push her further away from him. But once he had her secured in marriage, he was going to blister her hide for what she put him through.

"You're a bastard, you know that," Matthew grunted, causing Damien to laugh.

"It's one of my best traits."

"This is all very well but aren't you supposed to chase after the

princess when she runs off into the sunset with a pauper?" Simon asked sarcastically. "Before the sun sets?"

"Actually," Matthew said with wicked glint. "I sent a man out to delay them until I arrive."

"Ever resourceful," Damien choked on a chuckle, his eyes full of respect.

"I'm not about to let her run off with another man, least of all a Shaw."

Damien lifted an arrogant brow. "Does she even know about James and Derrick Shaw?"

Matthew shrugged. "It's doubtful, but given the circumstances and this is Evelyn, she might know everything."

"I don't think she would have dashed off with him if she knew."

"Hopefully he won't put up much a fight. The man is a mountain," Westfield commented.

"It matters not. He's a dead mountain."

Westfield believed him. Grey might not look it, but he was furious. For Shaw's sake, he hoped the man had some sense and handed Evelyn over without as much as a protest. No doubt this was some ploy Evelyn had hatched, but where there was a Shaw involved, one never knew for certain and the way his little sister and Shaw seemed familiar yesterday at the docks, hell, it didn't bode well for either of them.

Crazy wench.

He loved his sister, but he'd learned long ago never to get involved in female things. He might have instigated this whole mess, but it was in their hands now. To tell the truth, females scared the hell out of him. Sure he liked bedding them, but attachment beyond a good tumble had never tempted him. He wouldn't know what to do with one.

"I don't know why you all insisted on accompanying me," Evelyn complained, exasperation heavily etched in her voice. She glared at Jo and Belle. "This is my rebellion. You weren't invited."

"Nevertheless, we weren't about to let you run off alone with this stranger," Belle said motioning to James, and Evelyn knew that stubborn look in her friend's eye. She'd had it since they departed a few hours earlier, and she refused to listen to Jo's explanation that James was a good man.

"You're not the only one who is allowed to have an adventure," Belle remarked further.

"This is not an adventure, Belle. I assure you."

This was the final act. He would either come for her, or he would not.

Belle smiled. "You are running off with a man you hardly know, leaving behind a furious Earl that you do know. Of course this is an adventure!"

Evelyn glanced at James, seated beside her. He looked amused, without a care in the world.

"I'm not running off with anyone," she muttered.

James only smiled.

Evelyn massaged the bridge of her nose and sighed.

James shifted in his seat beside her. "Put it how you will honey, but when your precious Earl arrives, I'll be having some fun."

Belle shook her head at Jo. "Where did you find this ... behemoth?"

James chuckled. "Like what you see, sweetheart?"

Belle only snorted, giving Jo a pointed look.

"Behave James," Jo admonished with a smile. "Or you might just get more than you bargained for."

"Is that so?" James asked, his curiosity evident.

"You obviously don't know her very well," Evelyn grumbled. Saints help James if Belle set her sights on him.

"Well," James said glancing at Evelyn. "I wager we will be running into your Earl pretty soon."

Evelyn glared at James. "If we do, it will be your fault entirely."

But he was right. By now Simon would have realized she was missing and discovered the note she'd left on her pillow. And then he would inform Matthew.

A shiver made its way down her spine.

Then the coach suddenly came to a halt.

"Why have we stopped?" Jo asked.

"My guess is we're at the next coaching inn," James said unconcerned.

The driver had explicit orders not to stop before. James rapped on the roof of the coach, signaling for their driver to push forward. They hadn't been on the road long enough to reach the next stop. When nothing happened he rapped three times, waited, and then cursed.

Something was wrong.

"What—"

There was a loud crash followed by a scrambling sound. Evelyn groaned. Already knowing what was happening outside the coach.

James reached for the hatch, but the door was thrust open and a man appeared, blocking the way.

Matthew was breathing hard as he threw open the door of the coach. His eyes moved murderously over James, then Lady Josephine and Lady Belle until they stopped on Evelyn.

"Why, is this not a cozy little scene?" he said in a low, deadly voice.

He had been calm when he left the Tremaine residence but with every mile he gained on Evelyn his temper rose. His man had failed to detain them so they had put quite a distance between them and London. The sight of her friends however, confused him and threw him off balance. This was not the picture of your common elopement. Evelyn's cheeks burned bright red whereas a quick glance confirmed that Lady Belle's mouth hung open and Lady Josephine sported a triumphant smile. The appearance of utter boredom cloaked James Shaw as he sat with his arms folded over his chest, watching Matthew with amused eyes.

"Matthew," Evelyn interrupted his thoughts. Her voice held shock and... a touch of amazement?

He searched her face for any sign that she wanted him to leave, that he would never be enough for her. Eyes filled with weariness and hope stared back at him. She looked tired, defeated.

It gave him hope.

"I thought you were eloping with Shaw."

Evelyn's hands clenched so tightly together in her lap that her knuckles turned white. It was a logical assumption yet she still didn't know why he would have thought that, her note had been clear that James was only escorting her, nothing more.

Matthew didn't miss the gesture. "This should be quite an explanation," he observed. "You running away from the man you love with a man you never will." He rubbed his jaw when she gasped. "What a little hypocrite you are."

"He's perceptive," James said with a smile.

"James!" Evelyn exclaimed in horror. She turned her gaze back to Matthew. "We are not eloping, as you well know!"

"Then I find you," Matthew continued unperturbed by her outburst, "not only with him, but you've invited your friends on your little adventure as well. Or was this just another little scheme conjured by your imagination to have me chase you, yet again." He knew he was being unreasonable and unforgivably rude, but damnation! She had run away from him and this time with another man! His mind dwelled on that last thought.

"Bloody perceptive," James muttered again.

Hard eyes settled on James.

"Get out. Evelyn and I will continue this journey by ourselves."

"You mean to leave us here in the middle of the road?" Jo asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"But what if we are attacked or robbed!"

Matthew regarded Lady Josephine dispassionately, as if noticing her for the first time. "Madam, I have no interest in you or your

concerns.”

James stirred, every protective instinct coming to life. “I really don’t feel inclined to follow your orders,” he said narrowing his eyes on Matthew, sudden steel entering them.

Matthew smiled bitterly. “I’m not giving you any choice.”

“Is that a threat?”

Matthew moved so quick that before anyone knew what he was about, he had James by the lapels and was throwing him out. A feat to be sure, considering James was built like a brick wall. He gave Jo and Belle one hard look and they scrambled out of the coach in a hurry.

“Good luck Evelyn!” they chirped.

“You’re staying with me,” Matthew growled in a voice that brooked no opposition when she moved to follow her friends.

Evelyn would be a fool to stay with him in his condition, but he left her no choice. The words brooding and furious seem to have been created just for him. He settled himself across from her, his knee brushing hers deliberately, she thought. As soon as the door shut the coach sprang forward.

“You can’t just leave them there!” Evelyn hissed outraged.

“Settle down Evelyn, your brother and St. Aldwyn will find them shortly.”

Matthew’s dark gaze again caught hers and Evelyn felt as if he tried to look into the depths of her soul. It was a chilling thought, but it gave her hope. Perhaps he cared for her after all.

“You aren’t eloping.” It wasn’t a question.

“Of course not. I have no idea where you got such a ridiculous notion.”

“Your note.”

“I never said anything about eloping; only that he was escorting me to Scotland. I planned to join my Aunt for a while. Why are you here?” she asked, growing weary of his hard, glittering eyes on her.

His stare never wavered but turned incredulous. “Why?”

Evelyn drew herself up an inch. “Yes, why?” she said testily. “I told you I will not marry you. I believe I have made that fact clear.”

Matthew stiffened.

“And furthermore,” Evelyn added, “I won’t be exiled to the country, I have said as much.”

A long silence ensued, only the clatter of hooves and rattle of the carriage could be heard, the tension palpable. Matthew reached deep inside him, and visibly, with great effort, relaxed every muscle one by one.

“You have never told me what I’ve done,” he finally whispered, “to earn your distrust?”

Evelyn sighed. He was right.

"You do not believe I matter enough to tell me things. Things I would want to know. Marriage is a partnership of trust."

"I have never lied to you, Evelyn, if you wanted to know something, all you had to do was ask," he sounded annoyed with the accusation.

"I shouldn't have to ask! I have to trust that you will tell me."

"You can trust me."

"Truly?"

"Yes," he grumbled. "You don't tell me things too."

The statement brought her up short. He was right. Again.

"I've admitted as much and I've made it clear when I omitted any truth."

His jaw muscle tightened. "You astound me with your reasoning. But you omitted, very conveniently, your true identity when we first met at the Inn. You my dear did the exact same thing I did."

"That does not count!"

When he quirked a brow she continued, "I never thought I would see you again!"

"Why are you doing this?" he said with a frustrated breath, causing Evelyn to wince. "Why do you continue to look for excuses?"

"Excuses? I'm not the one forcing you to marry me."

"No, you are not. But you are the one unable to accept that I am not a monster trying to lock you away in a dungeon."

He was right again.

"Why can you not have faith in me?" he persisted.

How was she to explain? A few days ago she had been so certain what she wanted from life. Now, she not only knew she wanted Matthew, she couldn't bring herself to grab hold of him. Now that she had finally fallen in love, she was scared out of her wits. What if he did not love her the same way she loved him? She would love him forever, but that did not mean he would.

Then there was Charlotte. Did he still love her? That woman had crippled his heart. As it stood, he would suffocate her with his jealousy.

"It is not faith that I'm lacking."

"Liar," he accused softly.

His gaze held hers.

She swallowed.

"What I would like to know," he said quietly, "is what it is that troubles you so much that you feel compelled to run away from me."

She averted her gaze, staring through the window at the passing trees.

"Evelyn." The chiding affection in his tone unsettled her. "Why are you running away?"

Evelyn felt her chin quiver. She could not bring herself to say the

words that would seal her fate even though she very much wanted to.

His tone shifted. "Is it me? Do you find me lacking?" he asked, dropping his gaze to her lips.

Oh, No. It wasn't that. Why would he think that? He was perfect.

"Perhaps I don't love you."

Matthew grinned. "You do love me."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

"You would suffocate me."

His grin widened. "I'd give you as much freedom as you want."

"I'd want a partner."

"I'd be one."

"Yesterday you said—"

"Yesterday I was a jealous fool, today I realize that. Evelyn, I love you. I have loved you since the moment you stumbled into my bedroom, whether by accident or planned, I don't care. I am asking you, begging you not to leave me. Stop running from me and run toward me, us, our future. I've been such an ass. I promise I will spend the rest of my life making you happy. Take a chance on me, Evelyn. I will never be an easy man to live with and I'm too set in my ways to change overnight, but I will try my best not to be too difficult."

Evelyn blinked. He loved her?

He leaned forward and took her small hands in his.

"I do not desire an ordinary life. I crave dragons and witches. I wish to save the hero and defeat the villain. Give me that, and I will be yours forever," he quoted.

Tears gathered her eyes. "You read *Lady Sugar Finds Love*?"

"Every damn word."

Evelyn blinked away her tears. He truly did love her.

"Please don't cry," he muttered, panic starting to edge into his voice at the sight of her watered eyes.

"You love me?" she asked uncertainly.

"With my heart. All my life," Matthew confessed in earnest.

Evelyn shook her head in denial. "You are insanely jealous," she whispered hoarsely.

"Another excuse, Evelyn?" he asked gently. "I am a jealous fool yes, but only because I'm afraid of losing you."

He gathered her into his arms, placing a chaste kiss on her nose.

"I will never give up on us. As long as my heart beats, as long as there is breath in me, I will fight. Without you there is only darkness. I am so tired of the darkness. So what is it to be? Do I continue to fight, or will you admit you love me?"

When she only stared at him with those vivid, huge eyes, he didn't think, he just acted. His lips crushed hers, smothering her gasp. He

took advantage of her surprise, pulling her closer to him. There was something deep and primal lurking inside him. That same primal urge made him press her to surrender to him. This wasn't lust. It was terror and fear that caused the beast to rise to the surface. He was terrified she would continue to reject him and that he would have to resort to kidnapping. He certainly wasn't above kidnapping.

To his relief she relented when he deepened the kiss. She responded, tentative at first and then with growing passion. His tongue touched hers and his hand followed the curve of her spine, keeping her close to him. He pressed himself against her, wanting her to feel his desire for her, wanting to remind her that a simple kiss could ignite this explosive spark between them.

Evelyn caught her breath, enjoying the feel of him against her as she looped her arm over his shoulder, while his arms held her captive. Slowly, deliberately, he began making love to her with his tongue. She felt his mouth smile against her hers when a little groan escaped the back of her throat. Her body fit so well with his.

Slowly, reluctantly he broke the kiss.

"I love you. I do not want to spend one more moment apart from you. I can't breathe when you are not near me."

His voice was rough as his gaze riveted on her swollen lips. They covered hers again, in a hard kiss that tasted of passion and hunger.

But just as quickly as he'd started the kiss he ended it, lifting his head and staring down at her with glittering eyes that seem to see every thought floating in her mind.

"Say it," he whispered as his eyes held hers spellbound.

"Say that you love me."

In that moment Evelyn knew she was done resisting him. She loved him. She wanted to be with him. And this would be the perfect moment to admit it, in his arms, eyes locked together, swollen lips, love sparkling in his gaze. But she had taken too long to answer, and he mistook her silence for denial.

Matthew sighed in defeat. "Evelyn," he whispered raggedly. "You have such a wild imagination, yet for some reason you cannot imagine that I love you, you cannot imagine yourself loving me."

Evelyn choked on a sob, "I do love you, from the first moment. I was so blind, and then you arrived with Charlotte on your arm and I thought I was too late."

Evelyn was sobbing uncontrollably now and Matthew tightened his arms around her as relief washed over him. He pressed a gentle kiss on her forehead.

"This is our fairy tale," he whispered against her ear and for the first time in six years, he believed it.

"Matthew—"

He pressed a finger against her lips to cut her off. "I will try not to be too much of an overbearing love sick fool, but I will never leave you, never betray you. I may as well never let you out of my sight again. You are too much trouble."

Evelyn laughed through a sob. "I know."

"I am not saying it will always be easy," he murmured, his fingers brushing over her tearstained cheek in a feather light touch. "But we are both worth giving each other a chance. I am entrusting you with my heart, it's yours to do with as you please, and I am asking you not to break it. Will you trust me with yours?"

Evelyn wiped the tears from her face. She could not believe it had taken so long for her to see what was right in front of her all along. He was right. They both owed themselves this chance at a fairytale love.

"Yes," she whispered and snuggled deeper into his embrace. She smiled when he inhaled the scent of her hair.

A mischievous glint entered his eyes, "Imagine that."

Thanks for reading!

I hope you enjoyed *An Earl's Guide to Catch a Lady!*

If you'd like to learn more about me and my books, please visit www.authortanyawilde.com and sign up for my newsletter to be notified whenever I have a new release. You can also follow me on Twitter @wilde_tanya or like my Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/Tanya-Wilde>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tanya Wilde developed a passion for reading when she had nothing better to do than lurk in the library during her lunch breaks. Her love affair with pen and paper soon followed after she devoured all of their historical romance books!

When she's not meddling in the lives of her characters or drinking copious amounts of coffee, she's off on adventures with her partner in crime.

Wilde lives in a town at the foot of the Outeniqua Mountains, South Africa.

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An Earl's Guide to Catch a Lady Tanya Wilde

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